



SACRED VOWS

PANELISTS WEIGH IN ON THE SANCTITY, SIGNIFICANCE AND SURVIVAL OF MARRIAGE IN MODERN SOCIETY

Ambassador's Wedding Issue is a celebration of what many hope will be the happiest day of their lives. We raise a glass and offer a toast, wishing new couples a life of joy and delightful wedded bliss.

But after the vows have been said, and the honeymoon is over, what remains is “for better or worse, for richer or poorer, for as long as we both shall live.”

While many couples still embark on their matrimonial journeys harboring fairy tale dreams of happily ever after, truth is, wedded bliss is hard work, so *Ambassador Magazine* assembled a panel of experts at Birmingham’s Community House for a roundtable discussion about that sacred institution. Each panelist counsels couples before, during and sometimes after marriage.

“What is the state of marriage?” *Ambassador* Publisher and Roundtable Moderator, Denise Ilitch, asked. “How would you characterize it?”

“Marriage is still the predominant mode of family interaction,” Rabbi Josh Bennett of Temple Israel says. “We still see young couples aspiring to create monogamous relationships with a loving partner. I think marriage represents – both from a religious perspective and a social perspective – the basis of our American communal family life.”

“It’s the beginning of families, it’s the beginning of homes, and it certainly is the beginning of fulfillment for many people who grew up aspiring to become married couples,” Bennett continues.

“When we think about marriage [these days], we have to be prepared to find a lot of different things,” replied Thomas Blume, Ph.D.

Dr. Blume is an associate professor and coordinator of Couple and Family Counseling at Oakland University, and a private practitioner.

“There are a lot of different kinds of marriage now. It’s not just young people starting their life together,” Dr. Blume says. He cites family studies literature that reports 50 percent of marriages are now remarriages.

“I think that the state of marriage today is very much in flux

about what marriage is,” Ellen Yashinsky Chute, chief community outreach officer at Jewish Family Services says.

“Many people who are married today have long ago visions of how it should be, only it doesn’t turn out to be like that. A lot of the struggles that we see in marriages today are because current marriages don’t fit into old prototypes.”

Dr. Tracey Stulberg, Ph.D., director of Birmingham Family Therapy Clinic believes that a lot of individuals enter family life not understanding how much work it’s going to be.

“People don’t understand it’s the most important job you’ll ever do, the most important career choice, if you do it right, and the most important contract that you’ll sign. But they don’t treat it like that, whether it’s a blended family, a single parent family or a two parent family,” Dr. Stulberg says.

Ilitch points out that many young people wonder whether the notion of marriage is outmoded in our current society.

“I don’t think it’s outmoded,” says Dr. Larry Friedberg, Ph.D., a past president of the Michigan Interprofessional Association on Marriage, Divorce, and the Family.

“Most people who get divorced get married again, so they still believe in the institution of marriage. But to some extent people have a consumerist [view] of marriage, where if they’re not getting their needs met at the present time, they will go out and trade in their marriage for a new model. But they’re still looking for fulfillment through marriage,” Friedberg says.

Yashinsky Chute mentions that this is the first time in history that the notion of love has entered the marriage equation.

“Marriage used to be a contract. It was like, ‘you have your jobs, and I have my jobs’, but now somehow it’s about love. Like you have to ‘like’ that other person. You have to somehow have respect for that other person. Those are new concepts,” she says.

Rabbi Bennett elaborates, “When you add a modern context, which is, ‘how do I feel about a person and how do I engage with that person on a day to day basis,’ it does change the nature of the institution.”

David Grobbel, L.M.S.W., associate director of marriage and family at the Archdiocese of Detroit, offers a slightly different perspective.

“In the Catholic or Christian tradition, marriage is not a contract. It’s a covenant. And the basis for a covenant is a binding relationship that can’t be broken regardless of infidelities. If they entered into a covenant relationship, then they are indelibly and indissolubly united with each

other. So there are no conditions or clauses or whatever, that would render the covenant void," Grobbel says.

"But there's a common theme here," Blume says. "The reason people keep [getting married], is because the idea of marriage is that I'm going to have a permanent partner, someone I can rely on. That's what people seek. That's why they keep doing it over and over."

Dr. Stulberg agrees. "I think you can have both. Love is a verb, and everyone has the right to come in saying, 'I deserve to be loved.' That can happen along with stability, so in a good way, we've extended the definition of what a marriage is. The marriages that last the longest are the ones where there is that love, there is that actual show of, 'this is what it's going to take.'"

Mark and Betty Squier are a couple who have been married for 45 years. They are local ministers with an international program called Retrouvaille [French for "rediscovery"]. The faith-based organization, founded in Quebec, Canada in 1977, helps troubled couples heal and renew their marriages.

"[In Retrouvaille] we define a marriage as having four stages," Mark explains. "In the beginning, the Romance stage. During the romance stage, you don't see each other's flaws very well. That's followed by the Disillusionment stage, which is where you start noticing the things that irritate you a little bit. The third stage though... Misery. That's when divorce happens, because that's when the spouse is seen as the reason for my misery. But the fourth stage, which is perhaps the most beautiful part, is the Awakening stage."

During the 19th year of their marriage, Mark had an extramarital affair. "We decided not to go through the divorce. We went through the Retrouvaille program, and decided to implement some of the principles in our lifestyle," says Mark.

"The first thing we did was eliminate the Married/Single lifestyle," Mark says. This is when couples become almost like roommates, and they live their lives separately although they are still married and living under the same roof.

"So many couples today see Misery as the last stage," Yashinsky Chute says. "They don't have a sense that after misery comes something else, or even to conceptualize that this misery that I'm in right now is just part of the process."

At the point when couples start feeling miserable, it is often best to get some help. The time frame on these stages seems to depend on the couple.

"What we've experienced at Retrouvaille 20 years ago, is that longer married couples would come to the program," Betty says. "Now couples come after they've only been married eight or nine months. We applaud them for that because they are starting to recognize early on that they need help sooner. But it often surprises us that they aren't still in that romance stage after less than a year of marriage."

Rabbi Bennett asks, "Does a marriage have to go through a misery stage? I've been married 17 years now, and we are still in a romantic state of our marriage. The way we do that is by taking a dedicated approach to making the marriage real and viable every day. So we force ourselves to go on a date once a week."

"We recognized that marriage takes the work earlier on. So you don't have to wait to go through those four stages in order to achieve the last part of the process."

"As a rabbi, I tell every couple they should have a therapist from the minute they walk down the aisle. You can't do this alone in this society," Bennett says.

Mark responds, "Yes, for the most part, these are miserable couples that we're dealing with. They need words of hope, and our main job as a facilitator is to give them that hope."

"Roughly 40 to 50 percent of marriages fail," Grobbel says. "You bump that up to 60 percent for second marriages, 70 for third. But two-thirds of marriages that fail, fail within the first ten years. So that's the window within which these problems of communication and conflict are going to start resolving. If a couple starts hitting those bumps in the road left unattended and isolated, that's when they will start [drifting apart]. So that's when you want to recognize that window, and be proactive."


Henry Gornbein is a family law expert, divorce attorney and writer who blogs for *The Huffington Post* and other publications. He says, he sends every couple that comes to him, to counseling for three reasons.

"The first reason is to see if the marriage can be saved. The second reason is if you're going through a divorce, you need a support system. And the third reason is so you learn why you picked this person in the first place, so you don't repeat the same mistakes again."

"People tend to remarry the same person," Gornbein says. "It might be a different package, but it's the flavor of the month, so to speak. Too much of our society is disposable, and people don't commit like they used to 30 or 40 years ago."

"It's an erroneous assumption that what's wrong in my miserable life right now is you," Yashinsky Chute says. "If that's what you think, you're just going to move on and find another 'you', and that one's not going to work out for you either. Unless you can decide that what's wrong in my life right now is at least 50 percent me, and you're going to do something about that 50 percent that is you, nothing is going to be any different."

Our experts agree there are a lot of different reasons that couples have problems - money, sex, and lack of communication are the top three. Other challenges include differences in parenting styles, and each person's ability to handle stress, or how they deal with the things their partner does to irritate them. Those difficulties can be compounded when couples come from different cultures, or races or religious backgrounds.

But the one factor that seems to determine how long a marriage will last is the depth and strength of a couple's friendship. "The goal is that your spouse - your husband or your wife - is your best friend," Gornbein says.  — Nadir Omowale

MARITAL RESOURCES

Our panelists offer their top suggestions and resources for marriage, divorce and relationships.

1. **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**, Stephen Covey \$15.95, Free Press Publishing, [Specifically Emotional Bank Account section].
2. John Gottman, works include **Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work** (\$15.11) & **Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last** (\$15).
3. Terrance Real, works include **The New Rules of Marriage: What you Need to Know to Make Love Work** (\$16) & **Wonderful Marriage: A Guide to Building a Great Relationship that Will Last a Lifetime** (\$19.95).
4. **Love & Respect: The Love She Most Desires; The Respect He Desperately Needs**, Emerson Eggerichs, \$22.99, Thomas Nelson Publishing.
5. **Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love**, Sue Johnson, \$25.99, Little Brown and Company Publishing.
6. **Prepare-Enrich Relationship Assessment**, prepare-enrich.com, "Online tool with preparation for marriage and help to enrich marriages."