

Taking the plunge: Marriage conversations

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [April 5, 2000](#) issue

When I first told friends that David and I were having serious marriage conversations, I expected smiles and congratulations. Instead I observed raised eyebrows and puzzled frowns.

My friends' first question is understandable. "He lives in Arkansas. You have another two years in New York before you finish your doctoral course work. Won't you be engaged forever?"

"No," I reply, "we'll go ahead and get married next year and just live apart for a while. It will be tough, but temporary."

"Why get married then? What's the point?"

I respond with David's words to me: I'd rather be married to you and not living with you than not married to you and not living with you. "But why?" insists Ellen. "Isn't he just being possessive?" "She can call it possessive if she wants," David later says to me, "if wanting you to be my wife is being possessive."

My friends remained unconvinced. "Isn't being married about living together?" asks Marie. I point out that Marie lives with her boyfriend and they are not married; in fact, they violently resist the idea of getting married.

Don't get me wrong. I daydream about living in the same house with David, about turning that house into a home with him, cooking and going grocery shopping and arguing over whose turn it is to vacuum. But those things are not the essence of marriage.

Marriage is a sacrament. An ontological change happens at the altar, something real and fundamental, just as something real and fundamental happens during the Lord's Supper. God imbues you with grace in a special way at baptism and communion, and in marriage God comes to dwell not just in you, but in your relationship. You

cease to be two and become three. It is that grace, that glue, that I want with David.

When they aren't busy grilling me about long-distance marriage, my friends press me about my professional prospects. "Won't marrying now screw up your career?" asks Heather. Even my father chimes in: "This doesn't seem like the right time in your professional life to be thinking about marriage."

Yes, the academic job market is tight and one has little geographical mobility. But I think their comments would be the same if I were pursuing dentistry or journalism. "What if you get a really good job offer," asks Heather, "and you can't take the job because of David's job? After all these years in school, all these years of studying and all-nighters, won't that be awful?"

"It would be hard," I concede. But what I'm thinking is, "When did the values of everyone I know get turned upside down?"

I suspect they were turned upside down sometime before most of my friends were born, sometime in the mid-'60s. I say this not to repudiate feminism: I count myself among the small but vocal band of evangelical feminists. I hope to pull off that precarious balancing act of children-plus-career. I believe that God has given me gifts as an historian. If he sees fit to present opportunities to use those gifts teaching in a college classroom, then I will try to use them to his glory. I'm sure marriage will be bad for my career. It will be time-consuming and inconvenient and it won't result in tangible accomplishments, like books written and papers graded, that I can point to at 5 o'clock. But by that logic, prayer is bad for my career too.

Apparently one consequence of the cultural revolution known as feminism is that in some circles women are no longer supposed to want to get married. Marriage, the logic goes, is nothing more than an outdated economic bargain: Men earned money, women kept house and produced progeny. Out of the deal, men got heirs and women got food and clothes. Now that women can feed and clothe themselves, they don't need to marry. Even the romantic who dares to suggest there was more to it—that there was meaning, love and fulfillment—is quashed. Women now find fulfillment at the office just as men do. So a woman who wants to marry either has no prospects for professional success or must be needy and pathetic.

Pop psychology and Oprah tell me that wanting to marry is a sign of weakness. They tell me not to rely on anyone else; after all, my husband will probably leave me. My mother, who is divorced, was determined to help me avoid heartbreak at 40. Rather

than teach me how to make a good marriage, she tried to teach me that I did not need a man to be happy. She looks at my sister who is 30 and single, and beams. Leanne has a successful and challenging career, a beautiful three-bedroom house and lots of interesting friends. That she seems lonely apparently doesn't matter. No one stops to think that her headstone might have to read, "Superb lobbyist with tastefully decorated living room," instead of "Beloved wife and mother."

My mother's logic is flawed. True, loving is a risk. Maybe David will divorce me in 20 years. Maybe he will die first. But surely pretending to be utterly self-reliant is not the best response to those stark predictions. Isn't it better for me to remember that I depend on God?

And that is the other reason to marry—not only does it cement your relationship with another person, but like everything else we are called to do, it cements your relationship with God. Maybe wanting to get married is a sign of weakness, just as needing God is a sign of weakness. But Christianity has always been about acknowledging a certain kind of weakness. After all, at the center of our faith is a God who became weak for our sake.

I have often thought that Christians need to strive to have countercultural marriages, starting with the wedding. Weddings should not cost \$43,000—the bill of a wedding I went to this fall. And countercultural in the meaning of marriage itself—that when you say you're going to stick it out through the worst parts, you really mean the worst parts.

In fact, with friend after friend telling me that getting married is silly for a professional gal like me, I've decided that marriage itself is countercultural, and that David and I must turn elsewhere for guidance. These days we are reading the "Prayer for one in love," from the 1951 Lutheran prayer book, which has offered better guidance than my friends: "O Lord, who doth direct our lives day after day, I thank Thee that Thou hath so graciously led me through these days of my youth and hath preserved me from straying and falling. I come to Thee for special guidance in these days when I am choosing a life companion. Lord, thou canst look down the pathway of my life. Thou knowest if this young man is truly a fitting partner and companion for me. If so, O Lord, grant that our lives may be fused into one and we journey on together happily. . . . Amen."