

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

By David A. Watson, Ph.D.

I'll never forget the first time I saw her, not that it was a scene worthy of Hollywood or anything. It's just that my expectations were so low I simply could not be disappointed. My future bride let it be known at Sunday services that she was looking to share a ride to the University of Houston, and did anyone know of a carpool in town traveling that direction? Mom was only too happy to volunteer (since I wasn't there) that indeed, her son the graduate student drove his fuel-efficient car there every day, and gosh yes, he could sure use some help buying gas. So there I found myself, one foggy Monday morning in September, some 20 years ago, looking for a slightly built, dark-haired kid whom I had never personally met. It was early, I was tired, and I was certainly in no mood to talk (especially after a still painfully-recent breakup), yet there I was, searching a church parking lot for signs of life. Across the way I spotted her, petite, perky, and preppy. She hopped in, introduced herself, and two decades later she still hasn't stopped talking. Here, then, is a quick snapshot of the state of marriage in the United States.

Data available from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate that a major shift in this societal mainstay is occurring around the USA. While our marriage rate remains higher than that of other western democracies, we are marrying less often, and more of us will never get married. Moreover, over the past 30 years, the number of Americans who are either widowed or divorced is increasing, and the number living together has increased eight-fold. We are also, for a variety of reasons, marrying later in life. In 2002, greater than 40% of adults in this country are not married. The divorce rate in the USA climbed steadily between 1960 and 1980, and appears to have leveled off at a rate roughly double that for Western Europe. Young people in their 20's are the most

likely to divorce, and the great majority of marriage failures (88%) occur within the first 10 years of marriage. Cumulatively, slightly less than 50% of marriages end in divorce, with roughly 2% of married couples splitting up in any given year. Sadly, children are affected by these trends as well; e.g. the percentage of children living in single parent homes has tripled in 40 years. Moreover, children of divorce are more than four times as likely to live in poverty as those in first-marriage families.

If most people truly do marry for love, then why do they divorce? A difficult question, but recent data suggest some factors that at least strongly correlate with failure in marriage. If household income is greater than \$50,000/year the likelihood of divorce is 30% less; if the woman is over 25 years of age, the rate is 24% lower; and if the woman has education beyond high school, divorce is 13% less likely. Being young, uneducated, and of low socioeconomic standing are all, therefore, major risk factors making divorce more likely. Interestingly, divorce is also more frequent (by almost 10%) among those who cohabit prior to marriage.

My wife and I started out that fall as fellow carpoolers (and I admit I really was grateful to share the transportation costs), then progressed to friendship, and finally to love. We married in a city park early one cool but sunny Saturday morning a year later. We began with nothing of material value, really, just some worn furniture, a saggy bed, and several stacks of books. Since then, we've produced four beautiful children, earned (and paid for) four college degrees, and acquired myriad friends. Even now, I'm not certain I understand why we've succeeded where so many have failed, yet here are a few observations. First, before we became lovers we developed a strong friendship, gradually trusting each other more and revealing details about ourselves that might not have been

discovered had our relationship progressed more rapidly; and second, we have never taken our relationship for granted. We have meaningful conversations every single day, we make major decisions together as equals, and we always consider the impacts of our actions on our entire family. As I write this, it is now 19 years to the day since we tied the knot—am I ever glad I needed gas money!