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A Case for Courtship

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Introduction

I have been asked to make a case for courtship, and I have gladly agreed to try. I do so, first, because I believe in marriage, both for its unique opportunities for erotic fulfillment, deep friendship, lasting intimacy and personal growth, and for its indispensable contributions to the well being of children. I do so, second, because good marriages depend on good choices, and choices are more likely to be good if they are prepared by the activities of courtship. And I do so, third, because I believe that many young people today, despite all the evidence to the contrary, have deep and unsatisfied longings that can best be fulfilled in a solid and lasting marriage, and that mores and modes of conduct that could help them to establish such marriages would be for them a great blessing. For these reasons I am eager to attempt a case for courtship - and I cheerfully accept whatever good-natured ridicule I must incur for such a seemingly quixotic undertaking.

I say ridicule for I think I can anticipate your reaction to my topic. I suspect many of you are right now saying to yourselves, "Courtship? How quaint! She must either be blind to present day reality or afflicted with terminal nostalgia even to use such a term, let alone make a case for its practice." I confess to mild nostalgia, but I deny the charge of ignorance. On the contrary, my interest in courtship is spurred by a keen - and painful - awareness of the way things now are, especially regarding the sexual practices and reigning opinions of young men and women. About these matters, I have been sobered and educated by more than 25 years of teaching and conversing with young collegians. Indeed, my interest in the subject of courtship began in the classroom, sometime in the mid-1980s. It was the first day of my undergraduate seminar on "Men and Women in Literary Perspectives." I began by asking the students what they thought was the most important decision that they would ever have to make in their lives. Nearly all the students answered in terms related to personal self-fulfillment: "Deciding which career to pursue," "Figuring out which graduate or professional school to attend," "Choosing where I should live." Only one fellow answered otherwise: "Deciding who should be the mother of my children." For his eccentric opinion, and especially for this old-fashioned way of putting it, nearly every other member of the class, men and women alike, promptly attacked him. The men (and nearly all the women) berated him for wanting to sacrifice his freedom or for foolishly putting such

matters ahead of his career; the women (and some of the men) were offended that he would look upon and judge women for their capacities as prospective mothers, worse yet, as mothers for his children. From his classmates' point of view, this man was clearly a dinosaur who had not yet heard that his kind were supposed to be extinct.

My reaction was quite different. As a long and happily married woman, and as a mother of (now grown and married) children whose existence and rearing have been central to my happiness, I could - albeit with hindsight - endorse the young man's view. Indeed, I wondered only how he could have acquired such a mature outlook at his tender age. Far from condemning him as a freak, his opinion revealed an admirable seriousness about life and the life cycle, which one would be only too pleased to see in one's sons (and daughters) or sons-in-law (and daughters-in-law). Why, I wondered, were not more of our young people aware of the importance - to their own future flourishing - of private life, marriage, and family? Why did they not foresee the supreme importance of finding the right person with whom they might make a life, both for themselves and for those who would replace them?

Since then, I have paid increasing attention to the opinions and, to a lesser extent, the practices of our students regarding matters of love and marriage. Repeatedly, I have heard their skepticism about marriage and family life. I have watched many of them, well beyond their college years, bumble along from one unsatisfactory relationship to the next, and I am often profoundly saddened by the thought that they are in danger of missing out on one of life's greatest adventures and, through it, on many of life's deepest experiences, insights, and joys. Yet, for their failures and fumbblings in this area, they are not themselves entirely to blame. For we - their parents, teachers, and the larger society - have poorly prepared them to get themselves well married. Strangely, even in the midst of all the current concern about "family values" and the breakup of marriages, very little attention is being paid to what makes for marital success. Still less are we attending to the ways and mores of entering into marriage, that is, to wooing or courting.

There is, of course, good reason for this neglect. The very terms - "wooing," "courting," "suitors" - are archaic; and if the words barely exist, it is because the phenomena have all but disappeared. Today there are no socially prescribed forms of conduct that help guide young men and women in the direction of matrimony. This is true not just for the lower or under classes even - indeed especially - the elite, those who in previous generations would have defined the conventions in these matters, lack a cultural script whose denouement is marriage. To be sure, there are still exceptions to be found, say, in closed religious communities or among new immigrants from parts of the world that still practice arranged marriage. But for most of

America's middle- and upper-class youth - the privileged college-educated and graduated - there are no known explicit, or even tacit, social paths directed at marriage. People still get married - though later, less frequently, more hesitantly, and, by and large, less successfully. People still get married in churches and synagogues - though often with ceremonies and vows of their own creation. But for the great majority the way to the altar is uncharted territory: It's every couple on its own bottom, without a compass, often without a goal. Those who reach the altar seem to have stumbled upon it by accident.

In response to this cultural silence, my husband and I have recently put together an anthology of readings on courting and marrying, soon to be published by the University of Notre Dame Press. It is frankly and without apology a pro-marriage anthology, intended to help young people of marriageable age, and parents of young people now and soon to be of marriageable age, think about the meaning, purpose, and virtues of marriage and, especially, about how one might go about finding and winning the right one to marry. For despite the numerous obstacles to courting and marrying well (of which, I can assure you, I am very well aware), I am unwilling to declare the matter lost. On the contrary, I see everywhere major discontents with the present situation, especially on the part of young women. More important, beneath their easily verbalized but, I suspect, only superficial cynicism, I detect among my students certain longings - for friendship, for wholeness, for a life that is serious and deep, and for associations that are trustworthy and lasting - longings that they do not realize could be largely satisfied by marrying well. We need once again to pay attention to these longings and to offer them moral, cultural, and institutional support. It is high time to think once again about the importance of courtship. My case for courtship will have two parts, one negative one positive. The negative case for courtship rests on the miseries now experienced in its absence. Paradoxically, two aspects of the present scene that make traditional modes of courtship seem especially obsolete show why it is particularly necessary and desirable to alter our ways: the sexual revolution and cohabitation. Together they make a good, albeit negative, case for courtship.

I. Courtship on the Rebound

No doubt about it, the sexual revolution succeeded: all the obstacles that once opposed the bold affirmation of natural impulses to sexual pleasure have virtually disappeared - moral inhibitions, parental disapproval, fear of pregnancy, social shame, religious condemnation, you name it. The advertising industry, notorious for its shamelessness, has long been capitalizing on the marketability of sex, and movies and television programs prominently peddle voyeuristic enjoyment of sexual activity, and to ever

younger and younger audiences. By the time teenagers reach college age, everyone simply assumes that they are already, or will soon be, sexually active. School policy to distribute contraceptives ratifies and, arguably, promotes such activity. Even the logistical obstacles to premarital intercourse posed by the difficulty of finding convenient places have been removed: lovers' lanes have long ceased to exist and back seats of cars have returned to their original purpose. What need for private hideaways now that college dormitories are co-ed and mom and dad wink when Jenny brings Jimmy home for the night? Severed from the requirement to marry and all moral restraint, the pursuit of unencumbered sexual pleasure is now severed also from romance, love, and lasting, personal involvement. "Hooking-up" - hitching oneself to someone one has met, usually at a party, for a one-nightstand - and "scamming" - group dating leading to sex after drinking - are among the more common practices of many collegians, and even some high schoolers.

But as the bacchanal continues, it has become clear, especially for the women, that all is not well. Far from it. The happiness they were promised - the happiness they dearly want - is somehow eluding them. For many a young campus coed, once-hallowed erotic aspiration has turned into neurotic desperation: the tacit understanding that they are willing and able to have sex is experienced as pressure to do so; and very often the guilt they are made to feel when they abstain far exceeds the pleasure they get when they indulge. Women complain that many of the young men with whom they cavort - including the most outspoken male feminists - treat them as mere playthings. For far too many of them the politics of sexual liberation for women have devolved into a veritable nightmare. While the young men brag about numbers of women with whom they have scored, many women speak about the early morning "walk of shame," as they return alone to their rooms from some encounter, often not even knowing the name of the person with whom they went to bed. (To be fair, there are some young women - female trophy hunters, they are called - who share the male sporting attitude, but they are far fewer in number.) Depressed, angry, and filled with self-disgust, many young people distressed over this state of affairs are driven into psychotherapy; many others seek help from school officials, who offer, only the cold comfort of litigation under the school's code of sexual harassment. No one offers advice or models behavior that could prevent such difficulties. No one appears to recognize that the problem lies in liberated sexual activity divorced from the interpersonal bonds that courtship once secured.

If casual sex has dismissed the need for wooing as a prelude to erotic satisfaction, cohabitation has rendered obsolete the need for marrying, even for people who want more durable coupling-off. Cohabitation, once regarded as risqué or bohemian, has become as normal as membership in the Girl Scouts. By 1997, according to a study cited in David Popenoe's and

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead's recent report on cohabitation, the number of cohabiting unmarried couples in America topped 4 million, up from less than half a million in 1960. It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are currently living with a partner; another quarter has lived with an unmarried partner at some previous time.¹

The arrangements of cohabiting couples testify not only to the victory of sexual freedom but also to the triumph of sexual equality or social androgyny. Though sexual activity is taken for granted, cohabiting couples regard themselves as co-equal partners not as lovers, as having relationships not romances, and they refer to each other as significant others, not as beloveds. Most commonly, they move in together for reasons of companionship and convenience, without any commitments or promises regarding the future and, most clearly, without any intention of starting a new family. Each partner steadfastly protects his own autonomy, pursues her own self-definition, and promotes his own self-fulfillment. Though many such couples eventually marry, or more precisely, fall into marriage, they do so later than they used to. And mindful of the divorce culture in which we live, they oftentimes do so only after they work out their self-protecting pre-nuptial agreements. If they decide to have children (and these days it seems to be a big "if"), they homogenize fatherhood and motherhood in the neutered work of "parenting," in which both equally participate, part-time of course. As my students long ago attested, careers are very, very important.

But even as their careers flourish, even as these more "significant" relationships multiply, one senses that all is not well. According to the Popenoe and Whitehead report, cohabitation outside of marriage increases the risk of domestic violence for women; where children are present it also increases the risk of physical and sexual abuse of children. Moreover, even those couples who marry after cohabiting are faring poorly. According to one study, these "have a hazard of dissolution that is about 46% higher than for noncohabitators." Popenoe and Whitehead suggest that this is due to their "low-commitment, high-autonomy pattern of relating," which pattern is "hard to unlearn," not least because their cohabiting arrangements have separated them from the very people who could and would be eager to help them: their families, ministers, and, oftentimes, their friends as well.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, as Popenoe and Whitehead further point out, women and men enter cohabitation with different attitudes and expectations. The "[w]omen tend to see cohabitation as a step toward eventual marriage, while men regard it more as a sexual opportunity without the ties of long-term commitment." Once again, the desires of women are not well addressed by the prevailing practice and its official ideology. True, some women do not realize that they really want marriage until later. Many, however, do know from the start precisely what they

want but - in the present climate of approved cohabitation - dare not say it. These women live on unarticulated hopes, which far too often turn out to be false.

Prime time TV shows like "Friends" and "Ally McBeal" artfully try to turn all the intense sexual pressure and neurotic preoccupations into a great big hoot. But there is a new genre of literature about breaking-up, written mostly by women for women and commonly referred to as "dump literature," which pointedly indicates just how unlaughable things now are. Though it attempts to raise exiting from relationships into high art, its emphasis on revenge shows that its spirit is far closer to tragedy - Revenge Tragedy - than to anything comic.² When all is said and mostly done, the truth about cohabitation is largely sad and grim.

Yet, despite the hardships, despite the anger and cynicism, and despite the sorrows, the quest for Mr. or Ms. Right continues. Young - and not so young - people continue to spend a great deal of time engaged with - and much more time thinking and talking about - members of the opposite sex. Despite the grim findings of the most recent report on "The State of our Unions," there are signs that many people are still interested in marriage. Much time is devoted to figuring out, by hook and by crook and even by horoscope, not only whether but also whom to marry. How else to explain, for example, the enormous success of best-sellers like *The Rules*, that how-to-win-a-husband -and-have-everything-you-ever-wanted manual, or of John Gray's *Mars and Venus on a Date*, the "guide for navigating the stages of dating to create a loving and lasting relationship." But few have any idea about what Mr. or Ms. Right should really be like, and even if they do, they do not allow themselves the time it takes to learn whether the person they have just met is really the right one. Instead, they continue to repeat their own familiar patterns, hastily moving in and out of bad "relationships." They do not realize that they need to change their ways; they do not realize that they need different manners and mores. They do not realize that what they need is courtship or something like it.

People interested in thinking about new mores and manners pointing toward marriage do not face simply uncharted waters. They can gain some help from studying traditional forms of courtship. Earlier customs of courtship are relevant to present day thinking not because we aspire to return to times past, but because we can learn from these customs what they were trying to achieve and how they went about it. Indeed, because some sort of courtship would be desirable not just to escape from present evils but to secure and promote positive goods, the case for courtship should not simply be made on the rebound. So, let me begin over again, this time making a positive case for courtship by addressing the matter head-on: What is courtship? What does it entail? Why is it good for men and especially for women? Why is it good for marriage?

II. The Goods of Courtship

Unlike those even earlier mores that regulated relations between the sexes by paternal authority, religious edict, and arranged marriage, traditional courtship took erotic love of man for II woman as its starting point, but sought to discipline and direct it toward life-long, monogamous marriage. Not all activities by which a man shows erotic or sexual interest in a woman, or a woman in a man, qualify as courtship. The term "courting" goes back to the sixteenth century: "to pay amorous attention to, to woo, with a view to marriage." ("To woo": "to solicit or sue a woman in love, especially with a view to marriage.") Courtship is therefore distinguishable from flirting and seducing, from trysting and having an affair, and, to speak in contemporary idiom, from "booking up" or even from having or being in "a relationship": these activities, whatever their merits, do not aim at marriage.

Biologists who study animal behavior borrowing the term from human affairs, call by the name of courtship all male-female interactions that lead up to, or are at least pointed toward, mating. The analogy is not altogether misleading: in their courtship rituals, birds display qualities of strength, beauty, and vigor that help, say, a female peacock or pigeon select a most fitting father for her offspring. But human beings are not peacocks or pigeons; we not only mate but also marry and make a life together. We do so in part because we understand, as birds do not, what it means to be mortal creatures in need of intimacy and mating and, more important, of rearing the peculiarly human offspring we alone produce. As human males are more than studs and human females more than wombs, and as their relationship is much more than the perpetuating of genes or the pleasurable act that produces the genetic mixing, human courtship rightly understood necessarily involves more than its animal counterparts and the qualities of character that it both cultivates and evaluates go well beyond what is required for mere animal reproduction. Properly to make my student's choice - "deciding who shall be the mother of my children" - requires considering much more than whether she has beautiful blue eyes and is tireless at dancing the macarena.

Accordingly, human courtship is that collection of activities aimed at (1)finding and (2)winning (3)the right one (4)for marriage. Finding means more than hunting out or locating; it means also finding out if the located one is really right. Winning means both gaining reciprocation of exclusive amorous interest and affection and securing; consent and decision to marry. Discovering whether he or she is the right one - the heart of courtship - depends on taste and judgment, discernment and self-knowledge. But, to know the right one for marriage means first knowing something of what marriage means and entails, what it means deliberately and self-consciously to make a life with another human being - a life governed not only by

erotic attachment but by promised fidelity and devotion, mutual respect and care, and - at least in principle - open to procreation and perpetuation.

Marriage-for-love is hardly the universal human way. Indeed, even in the West, it is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, some religious and recent immigrant communities still practice arranged marriage, and there has even been a recent revival of secular professional matchmaking services. Here, parents or matchmakers seek to make a good or fitting match for their children or clients - and, truth to tell, the divorce statistics suggest that they can hardly do much worse than the partners acting on their own. But for most us, the very idea of arranged marriage is offensive to our notions of both love and liberty: far better to allow young people the freedom to find and win partners for themselves, to find and choose the one they love. After all, it is they who will have to live with whichever partner they marry. As with arranged marriage, the good sought may still be a stable and lasting marriage; but the governing principles are instead freedom and desire, which is to say, my choice and my love. Yet, as everybody knows, freedom and erotic preference can be, by themselves, unreliable guides for marrying well. However much we welcome the love of liberty and the modern preference for romance (ahead of economic and social calculations), we must acknowledge that leaving matters to free choice and passionate attachments offers no guarantee that freedom and desire will choose or love wisely and well.

How, then, to find and win the right one, to gain by one's own efforts a life partner that is both good and suitable for marrying? What can substitute - and, it is to be hoped, even improve upon - the presumed wisdom of marriage arrangers? This is the work of courtship. As stated earlier, traditional courtship took romantic or erotic love as its starting point, but sought to discipline it in the direction of marriage. The need for such discipline derived from the recognized promise and perils of sexual desire and the fickleness of erotic love. Built on a deep understanding of the human life cycle and of the ways that eros directed into marriage can be a vehicle to the higher possibilities for human life, courtship provided hot blooded youth with rituals for growing up, for making clear the meaning of their own sexual nature, and for entering into the ceremonial and customary world of ritual and sanctification. More specifically, by holding back the satisfaction of sexual desire, courtship used its energy as romantic attraction to foster the salutary illusions that inspire admiration and devotion. At the same time, its distanced nearness provided opportunities for mutual learning about one another's character. Also, by locating wooer and wooed in their familial settings, it taught the intergenerational meaning of erotic activity. The process of courting provided the opportunity - and the obligation - of enacting the kind of attentiveness, dependability, care, exclusiveness, and fidelity that the couple would subsequently promise each other when they finally wed. For all these reasons, one does not

exaggerate much in saying that going through the forms of courtship provided early practice in being married - a very different kind of practice, for a very different view of marriage, than the practice now thought to be provided by premarital cohabitation. Therefore, when it worked well, courtship provided ample opportunity to discover how good a match and a marriage this was likely to be. In addition, as the natural elements of love between man and woman become a path to marriage, these elements were shaped by courtship into its more than natural foundation. Courtship, a wisely instituted practice, was meant to substitute for any lack of personal wisdom. It pointed the way to the answers to life's biggest questions: Where am I going? Who is going with me? How - in what manner - are we both going to go? Despite massive cultural changes, these fundamental questions have not gone away, even as courtship has disappeared, and today's and tomorrow's men and women still need help in answering them.

My capsule description of courtship has so far ignored the importance traditional courtship attached to sexual asymmetry. The roles in courtship were sexually distinct: the man wooed, the woman was wooed; as in a dance, each quite self-consciously took up the appropriate part. Initiative apparently belonged to the man, and, at least superficially, he took the more active role. The man had to show by deed and speech that he was in love, not just in lust, and with this particular woman exclusively, and while this often made him vulnerable to poetical exaggeration and prone to fantastical excess - think, for example, of Shakespeare's Romeo or Orlando - his love indicated his capacity to look beyond himself, to be moved by more than selfish calculation, to risk ridicule, rejection, and failure. A lover - unlike a significant other - is especially fit for the adventure of marriage: he is not a fellow who plays it safe. In contrast to the calculating contractual partner, a lover, having given himself to the tempests of eros and having poignantly experienced the limits of his own autonomy, is much more likely to be able to promise "in sickness and in health," "for better and for worse." In the lover, sexual desire is sublimated and attached to an idealized beloved; his desire is inflamed by, and his eros focused upon a particular woman, whom he wants exclusively to possess and enjoy. Because she resists, his eros is enhanced by being linked to his pride, by his desire for victory, especially for a victory gained not through force - but through her willing submission granted by his winning her esteem. As Allan Bloom remarks (in Commenting on Rousseau's treatment of the same subject in Emile):

Even the most independent-minded erotic man becomes dependent on the judgment of a woman, and a serious woman, one who is looking not only for an attractive man but for one who will love her and protect her, may be the best possible judge of a man's virtues and thus be regarded even by the most serious man as the supreme tribunal of his worth.³

The correlative of gentlemanly ardor was traditionally understood to be womanly modesty - reticence and sexual self-restraint. This was, in fact, the sine qua non of courtship. It was this that made manly wooing necessary, it was this that made woman appear more desirable and worth winning, it was this that spurred his ardor and inspired his winning speech and conduct. It was feminine modesty that turned men into lovers - not mere sex partners - and that gave the physically weaker sex the more commanding power of judgment and selection. To the extent that she could, keep him somewhat unsure of and, hence, more eager for her return of his affection, she helped form on his side the exclusive attachment that she sought and that was implied in her modestly "saving herself for marriage."

Modesty not only spurred a man to love; equally important, it empowered a woman by defending her against the hazards of her own considerable erotic desires. She had more at stake in sex than did the man. (In fact, even in our age of female contraception and easy abortion, pregnancy remains a concern mainly for women - indeed, arguably, more so than ever, albeit for different reasons: the law now lodges responsibility and choice regarding pregnancy and childbirth entirely with her; in consequence, men are no longer under social pressure to marry a woman should she become pregnant with or give birth to his child.) But, contrary to popular prejudice, female chastity in the past was not mainly contraceptive in intent, rooted only in fear of unwanted pregnancy. On the contrary, it was intended to serve the woman's positive procreative interest in the well being of her (as yet unborn) children by securing for them in advance a devoted and dependable father, who would protect and provide for them. The "reproductive strategy" (to use the term of sociobiologists) was to attach the man exclusively and permanently to the woman through erotic love and to make him thereby also love and care for her - their - children. Women who thought of themselves as potential wives and mothers, and who acted accordingly, it was assumed, were far more likely to get carefree men to think and act as prospective husbands and fathers. Sexual self-restraint enabled a woman to find, hold, and win a man who was not only attractive but who was serious about life, serious enough to bind himself freely to the risk-filled adventure of marriage - and, implicitly, fatherhood - as the price for satisfying his erotic desires for her. In addition, her restraint before marriage gave the man confidence that she too was serious about sexual loyalty and fidelity, and, therefore that the children she would bear for him to rear would be only his own.

But sexual modesty and restraint awaiting-marriage were not just strategically sound and psychologically important. They were, in fact, emblematic of the unique friendship that is the union of husband and wife. In the union of husband and wife, the giving of the heart is enacted in the

giving of the body, and the procreative fruit of their one-flesh bodily union celebrates their loving embrace not only of one another but also of their mortal condition and their capacity self-consciously to transcend it. However important mutual love and companionship are, there is no substitute for the contribution that the shared work of raising children makes to the singular friendship of husband and wife. Precisely because children are yours for a lifetime, this is a friendship that cannot be had with any other person. Uniquely, it is a friendship that does not fly from but rather embraces wholehearted the finitude of its members, affirming without resentment the truth of our human condition. Not by mistake did God create a woman - rather than a dialectic partner - to cure Adam's aloneness; not by accident does the same Biblical Hebrew verb mean both to know sexually and to know the truth - including the generative truth about the meaning of being man and woman.

Courtship was centrally a matter for the courting couple, but the very practices it entailed required the couple to become mindful of the cultural and social settings in which it took place, and which gave it shape, supported its goals, and even provided larger horizons for the fulfillment of the couple's erotic longings. Unlike the cohabiting couple, whose homemaking often cuts them off from their families, the courting couple consciously established larger family ties which in turn provided links with ancestors and social networks of belonging. In this way, they learned the intergenerational meaning of erotic activity and, at the same time, prepared their parents to accept their own new station, no longer in the vanguard of life. After they married, the courting couple defined itself as a node joining separate lineages and as a link between generations. And, thanks to their preparatory practices, they were much more likely to recognize their stake in communal and political matters, as well as take a deeper interest in matters religious.

In courtship's heyday, its major proponents did not rest their case solely on the admittedly great benefits that would accrue to the family, polity, and community of worship or to the couple's future children. Rather, they saw in courtship a perfect vehicle for private personal happiness, for each spouse as an individual and for both as a married couple. So salutary did they regard courtship, that they held that its practice, should continue throughout married life because it offered the surest route to marital fulfillment. The habits of courtship could lead not only to the altar but to marital happiness.

The many lasting benefits of courtship, I have so far presented only in abstract terms, are vividly and concretely displayed in *The Memoirs of Two Young Brides*, a fictive account by the 19th century novelist, Honore' de Balzac. As the story Balzac tells also makes clear what women can accomplish if they aim high, it is especially worth rehearsing - even though

some of the features of the story will make it seem, at first glance, irrelevant to our present situation. Balzac's narrative consists of a correspondence between two young women, Louise and Renee, beginning soon after they leave the convent school in which they had lived together for nine years. Fully expecting their lives to unfold according to their romantic fantasies, they undertook the correspondence in order to continue their "beloved talks" and intimate confidences. For Renee, whose life we will follow, things did not turn out as she had hoped, at least not at first.

Within a month after leaving the convent, Renee found herself betrothed, in a match of convenience arranged by her parents, to a man who had suffered many years of harsh and involuntary exile and who was to all appearances a completely broken man. Though he was actually 37 years old, Louis looked to Renee as if he were 50. She herself was but 17. Despite these unpromising beginnings, Renee never despaired: "[F]rom the very outset I had been determined to accept everything rather than go back to the convent," she writes her friend. Moreover, she never relinquished her youthful hopes and fantasies, "[I]t is in our nature," she reminds Louise, "to ask for the greater advantage after we have obtained the least. And you and I, dear creature, are the sort of women who want everything." "Everything" is precisely what Renee set about to obtain.

This is the way she explains her strategy:

I kept watching my Louis out of the corner of my eye, saying to myself, has misfortune made his heart good or bad? By dint of study I discovered that his love for me amounted to a downright passion. Once I had obtained the status of an idol, . . . I realized that I might venture on anything. Of course I carried him off, far from the old people, to take long walks, during which I searched out his heart in the most prudent fashion. I made him talk; I made him tell me his ideas, his plans, his thoughts for our future. . . . I listened to his answers . . . I ended by perceiving that chance had given me an adversary, whose inferiority was deepened by the fact that he had an inkling of . . . 'the greatness of my mind.' Broken down by suffering and misfortune, he looked upon himself as something not far from a wreck, and was torn by hideous fears. . . . [H]e felt that I, as a woman, was much superior to himself as a man. . . . He feared he might not make me happy, and believed I had accepted him to avoid a worse fate. One evening he said shyly, that but for my dread of the convent I would not have married him.

"That is true," I answered gravely.

[T]wo great tears . . . rose to his eyes.

Having thus grasped the full extent of her powers, rather than lord it over Louis, Renee proceeded to devise a scheme which would, at once, raise up Louis' crushed spirit and satisfy her own longings for love and happiness - the "greater advantage. " Consolingly, she instructs Louis as follows:

It rests with you to turn this marriage of convenience into a marriage to which I could give my full consent. What I am going to ask of you demands a much greater sacrifice on your part than the so-called 'servitude of love' . . . Can you rise to the level of friendship . . . ? A man has only one real friend in his life, and I would be that friend to you. Friendship is the bond between twin souls, one in their strength, and yet independent of each other. Let us be friends and partners, to go through life together. Leave me my absolute independence. I do not forbid you to inspire me with the love you say you feel for me, but I do not desire to be your wife except of my own free-will. Make me desire to give over my free-will to you, and I will sacrifice it to you that instant. You see, I do not forbid you to import passion into our friendship, nor to disturb it with words of love, and I, on my part, will strive to make our affection perfect. Above all things spare me the discomfort the rather peculiar position in which we shall find ourselves might bring upon me in the outer world. I do not choose to appear either capricious or prudish, for I am neither, and I believe you to be so thorough a gentleman that I hereby offer to keep up the outward appearance of married life.

In short, Renee asks Louis to respect her independence and to live with her after they are legally married as if they were still single, until such time as she is inspired freely and fully to give herself to him. Renee in effect dares Louis to court her. And court her he did.

Thus assured of her freedom, Renee cheerfully undertook all the social ceremonies of married life, all the time prudently and purposefully going about the business of cultivating the "spontaneous" growth of Louis' character. The letter written three months after her marriage concludes with an account of the wondrous results of her efforts.

In spite of my coldness, his heart unfolded as he grew bolder. I saw the expression of his face change and grow younger - the refinement I introduced into the house began to be reflected in his person. Gradually I grew accustomed to him, I made him my second self. By dint of looking at him, I discovered the agreement between his nature and his physiognomy. One balmy evening I perceived a lover whose words touched my very heart, and on whose arm I leaned with an unspeakable delight.

At last, stirred by "the admirable faithfulness with which he kept his oath," the many signs of his restored strength and spirit, Renee gave herself to her husband. Describing the consummation of their union, she writes,

[n]othing was lacking that the most exquisite passion could desire, or the unexpectedness, which is, in a manner, the glory of that special moment. The mysterious charm for which our imagination longs, the impulse which is our excuse, the half-extorted consent, the ideal delights over which we have dimly dreamt, and which overwhelmed our being before we yield to their reality, every one of these seductions, in all their most enchanting forms, was there.

Renee's attentiveness to the importance of courtship did not end with their first love-making. As she says, "in spite of all these glories I have once more stipulated for my freedom." She insists that Louis continue to court her as before, and subsequent letters make clear how their marriage flourished as a result. Their married life is personally satisfying - fruitful, eventful, and mutually happy. The virtues Louis cultivated to win Renee - attentiveness, dependability, care, faithfulness and gentle-manliness - continue to characterize his relations with her. The virtues Renee practiced to charm Louis - prudence, tact, wit, foresight and womanly modesty - continue to characterize hers with him. Never once does she indicate anything less than the highest and warmest respect for her husband or for his personal and professional accomplishments, which turn out to be most impressive. Never once does she hint that the everydayness of her seemingly ordinary marriage is less interesting than the most romantic of adventures. As the years unfold Renee and Louis become increasingly dependent upon each other, their lives are increasingly and ineluctably knitted together, but at the same time they maintain their separateness and their love. In contrast to the preoccupations with personal autonomy and self-fulfillment that characterize today's cohabitators, the independence and preserved "distance" within this marriage - maintained in part by the forms of courtship - prove to be the basis of lasting intimacy, mutual respect, and a steady and refined erotic passion.

Self-respect and mutual respect, mutual admiration and willing devotion, fidelity and loyalty, mutual independence joined with romantic ardor - these fundamental fruits of courtship are, not accidentally, also essential prerequisites and benefits of any durable and happy marriage. To be sure, many courtships and many marriages - then and now - fall short of the ideal. Making a good match and living well in marriage are, even in the best of circumstances, no easy matter: Courtship and marriage are not for cowards and sissies, and even the virtuous need a large dose of good luck. But people generally do better when they are taught by their culture to aim high. The cultural ideals embodied in the idea and practice of courtship

surely elevated the erotic gaze, and offered guidance and inspiration that made people behave and fare better than they would do their absence.

III. Courtship Today?

Such is my case for courtship. Though there is much more to be said, I hope I have said enough to persuade you of its important merits. But even if one finds courtship attractive, the question remains: what has it got to do with us? Even if one grants every thing that I have said, how is it relevant to twenty-first century America? Quite frankly, I am not sure. I do not deceive myself by thinking that today's cultural situation can easily be altered for the better, and certainly not by dreaming (or talking) about bringing back some old practices. Inherited cultural forms, which grow up organically over centuries without anybody's noticing, can be undermined by public policy and social decision, but once fractured they are hard to repair by rational and self-conscious design. The causes of our troubled state of affairs between men and women are multiple, powerful, and very likely irreversible. And, truth to tell, most of us - myself included - would not want to roll back the clock even if we could, and we certainly don't want to abandon modern liberal democratic society, equal opportunities for women, or the easier ways of life made possible by the scientific-technological project, all of which continue to fuel the flames of erotic liberation and gender equality. If courtship or something like it is to make a comeback, it must do so under vastly changed social conditions, and it must no doubt adopt different forms.

Yet the time may in fact be ripe for some constructive efforts on the subject. In the last five years, discontent has not only found its voice. It has given rise to fresh thinking and new activity: In addition to *The Rules*, one can point to two important new books by the rising generation, rejecting the practices of the larger culture - Wendy Shalit's defense of *A Return to Modesty*, and Joshua Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (roughly half a million copies sold), advocating declared interest in the prospect of marriage as the condition for commencing any romantic involvement. Neither of these books would have been written or received such attention ten years ago. Jane Austen movies are a big hit, swing dancing is back, and Dr. Laura has eclipsed Dr. Ruth. With the help of the Independent Women's Forum, college women on various campuses are trying to launch a national movement to "Take Back the Date." And, reportedly, 618,000 young adults (according to some far more) have signed the "covenant card," issued by the True Love Waits program, promising not to engage in sex before marriage. Not exactly a revolution, but surely encouraging signs of awakening.

This is not the time nor place for brainstorming about strategies and policies. Deliberation about the means must await clarification and endorsement of the end. Before thinking about what one should do or about what is possible one should do some hard thinking about what is desirable. Bewailing and bemoaning the present age does not get one very far. Neither does dreaming about lost ages of innocence. But it is certainly reasonable and proper to use the experience of the past in the search for clarity about desirable and important goals. David Blankenhorn and the Institute for American Values deserve our praise and our support for having the courage, once again, to insist that we rise to the moral occasion with openness and hope, even if it looks to the cynical that we are only tilting at windmills.

One final observation. All serious exponents of courtship and the most profound students of the relations between men and women have noticed that power in these matters belongs largely to women - despite their relative physical weakness. Men made advances, women offered resistance plus the promise of yielding should the man prove worthy. This a woman did not because she was sexually repressed but because it was marriage she was after - not hook-ups, brief affairs, or even a long-term relationship. The key to the revival of sanity in relations between the sexes, it seems to me, is whether most women - and influential women - can rediscover and explicitly affirm that a fulfilling marriage and motherhood are essential aspects of their personal happiness. If so, they might again be willing - as a group - to exercise more sexual self-restraint and to eschew cohabitation, compelling men to demonstrate that they are worthy of their affectionate embrace.

¹ 1. David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. January 1999. *Should We Live Together?: What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage*. (NJ: The National Marriage Project).

² I learned of this literature and its spirit from Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. *The Dummies' Guide to Breaking Up* and *Getting over John Doc: A Story of Love, Heartache and Surviving with Style*, are two of the most popular books in this genre.

³ Allan Bloom, 1993. *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster): 104