

by Tim Downs

SPECIAL
SECTION

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Illustration by Gary Locke

MYSTIQUE

What married people and singles think about each other's lives is a myth that needs to be exposed.

It's been said that marriage is like flies on a window pane—those on the inside want out and those on the outside want in. When a single person looks at marriage, he sees the good things. And when married people look at singles, they see the benefits of being single. Being single is hard. The only thing I can think of that is just as hard is being married. Only when we remove the mystiques of being single and the mystiques of being married can we value what we have right now. ➤ Single people see what you gain when you get married, but they don't see what you give up. You give up some freedoms when you get married, like the freedom

of purpose and the freedom of resources. Freedom of purpose is having an undistracted devotion to the Lord. In married life it's difficult to just do whatever you want to do, because other people are involved. When you are single, you are free to send your resources where you want them, but when you

regarded as weird for being single? After all, we are born single.

The first few years of life you are not even aware that there is an opposite sex. Then you go to grade school and discover that there is an opposite sex, and you spend most of your time pretending that they have different kinds of conta-

ried couple. They sit on the same chair and rub each other's neck and stroke their hair. And when they are forced to sit apart from each other, they make little love signs at each other. After you watch this for a while, you start looking at people younger than you and thinking, *You know, she's not bad. She's*

MARRIAGE IS LIKE FLIES ON A WINDOW PANE—THOSE ON THE

get married, there are other people depending on you.

When a single person looks at marriage, he sees a sense of security and direction; a ship that is headed somewhere. Singles are often changing apartments or roommates and feel like they are drifting. Leading a family, however, is sometimes less like steering a ship than like leading an avalanche: It's already in motion, and you just help steer. In comparison, being single can feel like an aimless time in life because, all too often, singles believe that real life and purpose don't begin until they have someone to set sail with. So they waste many years, putting off a decision to follow God alone while they wait for their ship to come in.

Life comes in waves. The first wave comes when you graduate from high school and you and your friends go your separate ways. After that, you keep in touch with many of those friends only through letters or by word-of-mouth. The second wave hits when everybody gets married. Next comes the wave where everyone has kids. Later in life you find the wave where everyone loses their hair, and eventually the wave comes when everyone dies.

Our society has set up time intervals in which it is right to catch these waves, but if you miss one, you feel left out. We think of the marriage wave as the 20- to-30-year-old range. During that decade you should have your surfboard ready. But if that wave rolls past and your board is pointing the wrong way or you didn't quite come up to speed in time, you can find yourself feeling a little bit weird. But isn't it ironic to be

regarded as weird for being single? After all, we are born single. When I was growing up, my friends and I pretended that girls were radioactive, and if one of them touched you, you had to touch a certain rock on the playground to be healed. This stage lasts until you get to junior high school, when suddenly you discover the opposite sex the way they were meant to be. In high school you date, and in college, thoughts cross your mind of actually marrying someone.

You would never walk up to someone in junior high school and ask, "Are you single?" But the day you graduate from college it becomes a married world. And there's no help from those people who caught the wave.

Another part of this single mystique is that married people often see a single person as someone desperately in need of a higher calling. Whether marriage is a higher calling or not, one thing is certain—nine out of 10 singles choose it, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. I meet married people who think that marriage is something like salvation, something you've just got to have. That's why mothers will say, "Your brother is married, your sister is married, and now the only one I have to worry about is you." As if that altar at the church was a set of pearly gates that you pass through, and once you're married, you're delivered. This is why your married friends perform that awkward matchmaking for you. You go to a party and they say, "John, come in, come here. John, this is Marsha. Marsha is also single." Good. We have so much in common.

Sometimes singles can feel like the odd man out. Just watch a newly mar-

ried couple. They sit on the same chair and rub each other's neck and stroke their hair. And when they are forced to sit apart from each other, they make little love signs at each other. After you watch this for a while, you start looking at people younger than you and thinking, *You know, she's not bad. She's*

had her driver's license for two years now. The pressure is on. Many singles see a sexual bonanza in marriage. Single people have normal sexual desires, and unfortunately we live in a culture where sex is commonplace. Sometimes singles get tired of the restraint of being single, and they look at marriage as a place where people just let loose.

Think about the difference between a thermometer and a thermostat. Which one would you use if you wanted to turn up the heat in your room? The thermostat, right? A thermometer is just used for measuring whether the heat has actually gone up or not. One great fallacy about sex that is taught in our culture is that sex is a thermostat; if you know all the techniques, you can use it to fire up the heat in your marriage. Yet sex isn't a thermostat. Sex is a thermometer that measures the heat or the coldness that is already there. The biggest surprise to newlyweds is how much of sex is not sexual.

Our society says, "Are you really waiting until you get married to have sex? You'll be an amateur. If you want to be sexually fulfilled when you get married, you better practice now." Instead, to prepare for marriage, and for life in general, what singles really need to practice is communication and building friendships. Learn to apologize and genuinely forgive people. If you develop those relationship skills, everything else will fall in line.

When married people look at singles, they see people who are wild and carefree. That appeals to married people because the busyness of married life

somehow strips their relationship of its romance, which is what they long for. Yet, even though singles might not have the responsibility of raising and providing for a family, they do have responsibilities. They still have to do laundry and buy groceries and pay bills. Singles also have the task of seeking

cocoon, but what people are finding is that it's not enough. No one person, not even an entire family, can meet all of our deepest needs. If you enter marriage expecting marriage to meet all your needs, you end up disappointed.

When married people look at singles, they see people in need of salvation, peo-

ple they were single too.

We should learn a lesson from the mistakes of others. Today people are fleeing marriage in hordes, but they are fleeing singleness too: The vast majority of those who divorce also re-marry. The lesson for us is that there is nothing inherently satisfying about marriage, and there

THE INSIDE WANT OUT AND THOSE ON THE OUTSIDE WANT IN.

God's will for their life without the confirmation of a life partner.

When singles look at marriage, many see completeness, a way to meet their deepest needs. Sociologists write a lot today about "cocooning," where we gather around our mate, our children, our video games and our entertainment center, and we form this isolated unit that no longer touches any other units around us. Singles feel like they will not be fulfilled until they get their own

ple who desperately need the higher calling of marriage. They see wild and crazy and carefree romantic people. Is this a mystique or what? They see women who have only two items on their budget—clothing and going out to dinner. They see men who eat off Frisbees and drink out of Darth Vader glasses. They see only the mystique of being single, and it's all pretty funny except for the fact that many of them are sitting in their high estate of marriage wishing at times that

is nothing inherently satisfying about being single. There is something inherently satisfying in God, and in being right where He wants you to be. He has to be your source of security and satisfaction regardless of your marital status. ■

Tim Downs and his wife, Joy, and their three children live in Cary, N.C., where Tim directs The Communication Center, Campus Crusade for Christ's training for speakers, designers and writers.

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