

The Meaning of Marriage Matters, Part 1: Capstones vs. Cornerstones: Diverging Blueprints for Modern Marriage¹

Marriage remains a personal ideal and goal of nearly all individuals, but it has become more of a noteworthy achievement than a routine status. Andrew Cherlin, the distinguished family sociologist at Johns Hopkins University, may have been the first to label this emerging approach to marriage that is quietly transforming its meaning. Cherlin suggested that marriage “used to be the foundation of adult personal life,” but “now it is sometimes the capstone.”² In the capstone approach, marriage is a symbol that represents the achievement of two young adults who have reached a basic level of personal, psychological, and financial stability and success. Marriage is the capstone to a lengthy, successful transition to the adult world, rather than the cornerstone of young adult lives. Rather than building an adult life on a foundation of marital commitment, one must first accomplish a set of tasks and achieve certain marks of success before joining the institution of marriage to cap it all off.

This capstone model of marriage is gaining the upper hand in terms of both personal attitudes about young adult life and cultural buy-in. The average age at first marriage has increased dramatically over the past 50 years to 29 for U.S. men and 27 for U.S. women, and there is no evidence that trend is leveling off in the near future.³ Also, attitude surveys show solid support for a capstone model of marriage. For instance, a recent national survey of Millennials (ages 18–33) found widespread support for delaying marriage.⁴ Between 70%–80% agreed that marrying later means that both people are more mature, more likely to be good spouses, allows people to achieve personal goals so that they will have no regrets after

getting married, and provides more time to get personal finances in order. More than 80% agreed that delaying marriage gives couples more time to assess the marriage prospects of a potential spouse, while 75% agree that marrying later allows more time for personal preparation to be a better spouse. Nearly two-thirds agreed that getting married later in life improves chances that a marriage will be successful.

Although it is unclear what “later” means to these survey respondents, the average age of marriage suggests that they are thinking that later means at least the late 20s. Their responses seem to point to a widespread acceptance among young adults that delaying marriage is the best way these days to build a successful marriage. Similarly, they also suggest a real questioning of the wisdom of marriage in the early or mid-20s.

There is an understandable appeal to this capstone model of marriage. Delaying marriage while young adults explore their identities, get themselves “together,” fully experience single life, and establish themselves financially suggests that marriages are being built on a stronger foundation of individual readiness. Marriages would appear to begin with two stronger, settled, and mature individuals who are better prepared for the challenges of contemporary family life. Far from rejecting the institution of marriage, this new logic suggests that delaying membership may strengthen it.

Is the capstone approach to marriage a new model best suited to a new time, a sensible evolution of the way we do relationships and family now to fit a new century? Or is it a

revolution in the meaning of marriage, one that influences its institutional capacity to support the benefits to individuals and society that we expect of marriage?⁵ While we acknowledge the potential of a capstone model of marriage, we also see worrisome cracks in this new cement. Specifically, we see three significant engineering flaws in a capstone model of marriage:

- (1) It can lead to ineffective, even paradoxical preparation for marriage that may actually diminish marital happiness;
- (2) It elevates the risk of re-sequencing family formation, putting parenting before marriage, placing children's well-being at greater risk; and
- (3) It potentially places marriage beyond the perceived reach of many young people.

Ready or Not?

A capstone model of marriage is supposed to lead to a marriage built on a stronger foundation. But we see several potential relationship engineering problems with the capstone model that may lead to ineffective preparation for marriage:

- (a) difficulties switching from an individualistic focus to a couple focus;
- (b) casting marriage as a transition of loss; and
- (c) complex romantic relationship histories that teach the wrong lessons.

First, the capstone model, with its hallmark of delayed marriage, creates an elongated period of individualistic focus in young adulthood that may be more challenging to flip at marriage than we have supposed. As prominent emerging adulthood scholar Jeff Arnett noted, the early 20s is an “exceptionally *self-focused* time of life, in the sense that it is a time of life when people

have the most opportunity to focus on their self-development, including their educational and occupational preparation for adult life.”⁶ If marriage requires more of a “we-identity” than an “I-identity,” how straightforward is the transition to marriage and how easy is it to blend two different lifestyles together? Which is easier: to attach a compatible love to a settled personal life or to mold a compatible life around a committed love? Each strategy has its challenges, but the latter likely facilitates a stronger sense of “us” in a marriage.

A longer period of finding oneself and establishing an individual identity may, in some respects, lead to a more informed search for a compatible partner and yield a more mature and settled self. A more settled and mature self can be an important accomplishment that raises chances for marital success. But that is not all that is involved. In some cases, it may also make for a more difficult search and a less flexible spouse. Finding the compatible partner to match one's individual identity and lifestyle preferences can be a challenge, like fitting complex jigsaw puzzle pieces together. Megan McArdle writes in *Newsweek*, “when you've spent decades building a life, it can be hard to find someone who fits with all the choices you've already made about where to live, what hobbies and interests you will pursue, what sort of hours you will work, and so forth.”⁷ And there's no guarantee that when you do find your well-tailored spousal unit that you will be her or his perfect match.

Finding that perfect soul mate to match a settled self may be as statistically challenging as drawing to an inside straight in a poker game. Maybe this reality makes many capstone marriages a somewhat disappointing process of having to settle for less than you'd hoped. Moreover, if that

settled self is resistant to the personal remodeling that seems to be an inevitable part of building a functional marriage, and less flexible when facing married life's unpredictable changes, then that perfect capstone marriage may crack over time. Soft clay is easier to mold together than hard clay.

Of course, one argument for giving young people more time to focus on themselves is that they will get the typical young adult angst and adventure out of their system so that they are ready for the responsibilities of marriage. Yet this logic has some rough edges to it, too. For one thing, it can make marriage look as much like a transition of loss as a transition of gain. Marriage means settling down, giving up freedom, and getting serious. Neal Samudre echoed this concern for the *Huffington Post*:

Some people's solution to the growing divorce rate in America is to find out who you are and get what you want in life before you enter marriage; that way you're never left guessing whether you could've had more during your marriage. I hate this view. It makes it seem like you have to have everything together before you get married, like marriage is a halt to your ambitions, stopping you from doing what you want and becoming who you need to be. Love is not an end. It is continuous, encouraging and cultivating us to be more in this world.⁸

Even if it is the "right time," it can still seem like marriage is the end of youthful fun rather than the beginning of a grand adult adventure. Viewing marriage as net loss might make divorce seem more like net gain when couples experience hard times.

Moreover, do these youthful adventures really get things out of young adults' systems in a way that minimizes post-marital regrets? Or do they promote a perpetual, sentimental longing for the free and uncommitted life? For instance, does the sexual exploration of young adulthood facilitate the kind of sexual settling that supports marital monogamy? Here the research suggests the opposite, that greater premarital sexual activity is associated with greater risk of marital infidelity and instability. Research has found that having more premarital sexual partners is linked to poorer communication, higher infidelity rates, and even lower sexual quality during marriage.⁹ Perhaps youthful sexual experience does not effectively satiate the desire for sexual adventure; it may feed it and the belief that the grass may be greener in other pastures. And researchers point out that, for some, young adult sexual exploration is more of a depressing journey than an exciting adventure.¹⁰

A third potential problem with a capstone approach to marital preparation comes from the relationship history that accumulates over a prolonged period of single young adult years. As hinted at above, most individuals who delay marriage to their late 20s or 30s are not in just one or two romantic relationships before marriage. Not surprisingly, an elongated period of time before marriage often comes with an eventful history of romantic relationships. Many of these relationships will involve sexual activity. Several studies have now shown that having more than one sexual partner is linked to an increased risk of future divorce.¹¹

On the one hand, this would seem to present a valuable love lab in which to learn and practice needed intimate relationship skills. But what may seem like a process for

gaining valuable relationship experience may be more akin to painting a room than remodeling a home. What is being learned in the series of romantic relationships common to the young adult years that precede marriage is not well designed to help couples create a strong marriage. Marriage is not simply a higher level of a premarital romantic relationship topped off with commitment. There are fundamental differences. Despite its outward similarities of sharing a bed and possibly a residence, full commitment to the future transforms a relationship. A non–full-commitment relationship is not much like a full-commitment marriage, especially for men.¹²

Living together in an uncommitted relationship is another common occurrence as young adults accumulate relationship experience in an extended single period before marriage. Research has yet to confirm that pre-engagement cohabitation without a full commitment to a future together works well as a marriage-preparation strategy. In fact, it appears to be a risk factor for marital problems, even after taking into account the demographic differences between those who cohabit before marriage and those who don't.¹³ Serial cohabitation (or serial sexual coupling) seems to be an especially strong risk factor for later divorce.¹⁴

Some cohabitation occurs with both partners fully committed to marriage. But this is the exception now in the wide array of reasons and circumstances for cohabitation.¹⁵ Test-driving a set of relationships usually doesn't teach you much, because you are not driving the real thing. Uncommitted relationships are not reliable proving grounds for marriage.

Of course, sometimes premarital sex leads to unintended pregnancy, so sexual freedom

often leads to relationship constraints. Shotgun weddings are rare now, but shotgun cohabitations frequently take their place.¹⁶ The prominent marriage and cohabitation scholar Scott Stanley and his colleagues have been instrumental in documenting how cohabiting relationships often result in an accumulation of relationship constraints—shared leases, pets, planned vacations, and progeny—before there is sufficient information about the future prospects of the relationship.¹⁷ Most cohabitation begins as an exercise in freedom from constraints, but paradoxically produces an inertia that makes it harder to leave a relationship before adequately judging its merits. And as it turns out, most cohabiters who marry slide into matrimony rather than making a clear decision and commitment to a forever future.¹⁸ Sometimes it's easier just to stay on the same track and formalize the relationship with a ring than to break off the relationship in hopes of finding something better. Divorce may be a readier option in these convenience marriages, because there was never a definite decision point and a clear commitment to a till-death-do-us-part future.

Despite the issues raised here, we understand that there are reasons for wanting to delay marriage. Financial concerns loom; a third of young adults ages 25–34 say they are financially unprepared for marriage due to accumulated debt, poor employment situations, or other reasons.¹⁹ Contemporary women are still picky about marrying a man with good employment prospects, and many young adult men are still struggling that way. Likely, modern men bring this mindset as well to their marriage partner calculations.

For some, a capstone approach to marriage makes sense and can work well. When individuals delay marriage to invest more in higher education, establish steady work lives

and some financial stability, create a mature identity, don't indulge too much in casual sex, avoid serial cohabitation, and make a commitment to marriage before moving in together with their future spouse, a capstone fits nicely on this well-designed structure.

And we know there is a broad belief in our society that marrying young puts you at high risk for divorce. This isn't one of those obtuse social science statistics that never goes beyond the pages of stuffy academic journals. It has sunk deeply into our cultural knowledge and practice. In the past, those who married young—specifically, those who married before age 21—were at higher risk for divorce.²⁰ Over the years, that oft-cited research finding has been stretched to mean that marriage before about age 25 is a divorce disaster waiting to happen. This belief has fed a widespread reluctance to consider marrying before the mid-20s.

But more recent analyses of this correlation between age of marriage and risk of divorce have not painted a clear picture. Some analyses suggest that risk of divorce is higher in the teenage years and early 20s, comes down a little bit each year you wait to marry until about age 28, and then starts to go back up.²¹ Other analyses suggest that, if anything, the risk of divorce seems to go up slightly over the 20s, but overall looks pretty flat.²² We suspect that the couples who choose to marry at younger ages these days are very different from those a generation or two ago who married at young ages. In the past, many early marriages were so-called “shotgun weddings.” A baby was conceived, so the parents decided they should get married to give the baby a legitimate family.

Today, shotgun marriages have been replaced with shotgun cohabitations or single parenting. Most young adults these days think that getting pregnant is not a

good reason to get married. So today, those who marry at earlier ages probably do so not because they have to but because they want to. They probably bring strong views about the importance and value of marriage to their union. Even if they are not as mature as they will be a few more years down the road, that risk factor is washed over by their commitment to the institution of marriage and to their relationship.

But whether the risk for divorce goes up as you get a little older, goes down, or stays the same, researchers now are finding an interesting association between age of marriage and marital happiness. A number of studies now are finding that the sweet spot for maximizing marital quality may be marriage in the early to mid-20s. Marriages that occur between 22–25 are a little happier, on average, compared to late-20s marriages.²³ That is, those who marry in their early and mid-20s are a little more likely to establish happy relationships compared to their delaying peers.

Why? Perhaps it is easier to mold two lives together at earlier ages. Maybe those who marry earlier put more emphasis and priority on marriage in ways that make them more satisfying. Or perhaps some of those who marry later discover that it was too hard to find the perfect soul mate they thought they would meet some day and end up settling for something less than that, a good partner but something less than their dreams. Whatever the reason for this happiness bonus, the popular bias against earlier marriage may be misplaced.

Re-sequencing, Not Delaying

Another reason for a concern about the structural engineering of the capstone model of marriage comes from the real-life experiences of most people in our society

who delay marriage. A capstone marriage is often talked about as simply a delayed cornerstone marriage, a longer, scenic path to get to the same destination. However, delaying marriage in our culture today is rarely about just pushing a wedding date later in an elongated transition to adulthood. This is because while the typical age of first marriage keeps getting pushed later and later, few are pushing back sexual coupling. The rising generation enters into sexual coupling at the same age their grandparents did—they just don't do it with the commitments and social acknowledgement of marriage. So, in short, they are not delaying the full package of marriage, just parts of it. Keep the sex and companionship; delay the commitment and the sacrifice.

However, sex is not the only thing fragmented from marriage in this new arrangement. For many, the delay of marriage means a fundamental re-sequencing of family formation. A lot of recent research finds that marriage, if it comes, comes out of place in an optimal sequence for forming stable, healthy families in which to rear children. The influential family policy analyst Isabel Sawhill noted that there is a “success sequence” for family formation.²⁴ When children come after marriage, which comes after some education, then families are generally stable and children are likely to grow up in better circumstances and have better outcomes. Few families that follow this pattern are poor, while most families that don't are impoverished.²⁵

And this re-sequencing of family formation is becoming our new normal. More than 40% of U.S. children are born to unwed parents.²⁶ More than 60% of births to less educated women are non-marital and more than 50% of first births are now to unwed parents. Many of these non-marital births

are to cohabiting parents, but their fragile unions are unlikely to survive more than a few years.²⁷ Not all young adults these days re-sequence family formation patterns. Among the minority of well-educated young adults, only about 10% of births occur before marriage and education.²⁸ But a majority of young adults are not able to follow effectively the capstone model's blueprint for marriage success. So the bricks that build these families are placed awkwardly, leading to a rickety structure and a capstone that, if it comes at all, is likely to fall off.

A capstone model of marriage places marriage on top of a set of previous young adult accomplishments, but for many today these accomplishments are difficult to do in sequence (or at all). This makes forming and sustaining healthy, stable families more challenging for many today. And it makes life harder for the children of re-sequenced families, who experience a wide range of difficulties growing up and poorer outcomes.²⁹

Marriage Missed

The capstone model of marriage emphasizes achieving certain milestones and getting your life together before making the big commitment to a life-long union. But what about those who struggle to get it all together? There are many reasons why young adults struggle to get their lives in order. Of course, one big reason is that social and economic inequality in our society makes things like getting a good education and launching a career harder for some than others. And that social and economic inequality also makes it more likely that poor young adults will derail progress by getting involved with drugs or running afoul of the law. If getting to marriage is dependent on young adults

navigating a set of challenging roads, many will not arrive at their destination.

Among the educated and well off, marriage rates are high and divorce rates are low. But this is not the case among the disadvantaged.³⁰ Nearly 25% of U.S. men and 20% of U.S. women ages 40–44 have never married. Thirty percent of men and nearly 25% of women with just a high school diploma have never married by age 44. And more than a third of Black men and women in their early 40s have never married.³¹ The proportion of never-married adults age 25 and older has more than doubled over the last 50 years.³² One research organization projects that 25% of today's young adults will never marry by about age 50.³³ And nearly half of never-married adults say they do not want to marry or are unsure if they want to ever marry.³⁴ Two-thirds of young adults endorse the statement that society is just as well off if people have priorities other than marriage and children.³⁵

A great deal of recent scholarship recently has focused on how less educated and less fortunate young adults are struggling to form stable, healthy romantic relationships, resulting in fewer numbers of marriages for them.³⁶ For many, marriage is more of a dream than a feasible possibility. When marriage is closer to fantasy than reality, it means something much different. It is hardly a guide, a foundation, or as one scholar calls it, a life script for how to construct and live an adult life.³⁷

Of course, a good marriage often does come to those who delay it, especially to the well educated. But when it comes later, it might mean racing against the fertility clock to have children quickly or even forgoing the possibility of children altogether. Parenthood remains an important life goal

for a large majority of young adults; for many it is even more important than marriage.³⁸ A delayed marriage often means a sprint to become parents. But as blogger Matt Walsh writes, *“Our fertility is not a disease. Our biology is not a mistake. Our bodies definitely have an opinion about when we should start making a family, and I think we should probably listen.”*³⁹

The problem is that the capstone model for building a marriage may be becoming dominant in our society at a time when far too many can't or don't follow the capstone blueprint for success. This does not mean that the capstone model should be demolished and hauled off to the social history dump. Instead, an additional workable model is needed. We believe there is a need to open up cultural space to consider a revised cornerstone model of marriage that is accessible to a greater swath of today's young adults and perhaps is a safer path for many to their life goal of a stable, happy marriage.

A 21st-Century Cornerstone Model of Marriage

A capstone model of marriage has some cracks in it. But it may not be clear what a cornerstone model of marriage for the 21st century would look like (and not look like). How would making marriage the guiding life script of early adult life for more young adults work? And is it feasible and appealing enough that we could recommend it to more young adults?

First, a contemporary cornerstone model does not dismiss the need for a certain maturing before marriage. About 20% of first marriages occur at ages 18–19, and this is a higher-risk choice.⁴⁰ A great deal of maturing and personal growth occurs from 18–21. Statistically speaking, it seems wise

to postpone a decision about marriage until the early 20s.

Next, a key element of the contemporary cornerstone model would be careful mate selection and intentional preparation for marriage. A careful selection process would involve spending time and socializing in productive places for a potential partner. College or technical school, churches or religious organizations, voluntary service or advocacy groups, etc., will probably work better than bars and parties. And investing in a good marriage preparation program also makes sense for engaged couples.⁴¹

In addition, marriage still means the merging of two financial fortunes. In the case of earlier marriage, those fortunes likely will be modest at best. This implies that young married couples will probably need to accept a longer period of financial austerity in the early years of marriage. Exotic and elaborate weddings are popular these days, but they will need to be shelved in favor of more modest plans. The wedding industry often promotes over-the-top options. The industry could do more to promote and provide nice but relatively inexpensive wedding options for young adults with modest means.

Moreover, financial prospects for couples marrying earlier would prosper if parents were not so ready to cut off financial support for their young adult children when they marry. We often hear about parents who threaten to do that, essentially bribing their children to postpone marriage until they have completed their education and established themselves financially. A cornerstone model of marriage will be more workable when parents are open to the possibility of continued family support in the early years of marriage, when they have the means to do so.

Financial constraints also may contribute to a desire to delay starting a family for several years. This may actually be an element of a workable cornerstone model of marriage: delaying childbearing for a few years so that both spouses can pursue educational or early work goals, reduce financial pressures, and further strengthen the foundations of their relationship. Some suppose that marriage and childbearing are nearly contemporaneous events. But in an age of widespread acceptance and use of effective contraceptives, this does not need to be the case for all. Unlike those who marry in their 30s, those who marry in their early or mid-20s still are on the low-stress side of their fertility curves and may choose to wait a few years before welcoming children into the household.

Another important element of a functional 21st-century cornerstone model of marriage is a greater emphasis on mutual growing together, beginning in the more formative, soft-clay years. In contrast, the eminent family sociologist Paul Amato noted an increasing non-interdependence among contemporary spouses compared to a generation or two ago, what he termed “alone together.”⁴² A cornerstone model of marriage places greater priority on molding a “we-dentity” rather than connecting “I-dentities.” A cornerstone model is then, to some extent, a counter-cultural enactment of marriage reacting to a strong culture of individualism and materialism.

Today’s capstone marriage may be increasingly a friendly merger of two individual lives rather than a weaving together of those lives, more like a yoking of two oxen rather than an intricate subterranean intertwining of tree roots in a forest. In mathematical terms, a cornerstone model of marriage is closer to $2 \div 2 = 1$

than $1 + 1 = 2$. It is a connubial cleaving such that two become one. The challenge of a capstone model of marriage is creating “we-ness” out of established individual lifestyles and identities; the challenge in a cornerstone model of marriage is finding the space to nurture individual identities within a prioritized context of “we-ness.”

Challenges for a Cornerstone Model. Of course, a cornerstone model of marriage comes with challenges. How do those who have never seen a working marriage and have experienced a lot of family instability while growing up gain confidence in an institution like marriage, and in a specific relationship, to make marriage a cornerstone of their young adult lives? This is no small challenge. Of course, it would help to see some basic structural improvements in our society (e.g., better educational and economic opportunities) that will provide more solid ground on which to construct a stable marriage. Better relationship literacy education can help too. We can do more to help adolescents and young adults understand what a healthy relationship is and what a good marriage looks like. Also, we can help them understand and avoid the common pitfalls to forming a healthy relationship and an enduring marriage.⁴³

This is no closely guarded secret; we know a lot about how relationships work and how healthy marriages are formed. We also know a lot about what goes wrong.

Others may question whether a cornerstone model of marriage is compatible with women’s personal advancement. College-educated women who delay marriage until their 30s make substantially higher incomes than those who marry early.⁴⁴ Of course, much of this difference is due to earlier-married women taking on mothering responsibilities. But as we discussed earlier in this essay, a contemporary cornerstone

model does not require that marriage and motherhood be nearly simultaneous in time. Still, making career choices as an interdependent couple can be more complex than doing so as independent individuals. So some sacrifices may need to occur. But a cornerstone model of marriage does not require that women be the only ones making such sacrifices. Also, it is worth mentioning that a cornerstone model of marriage does not make any assumptions about how husbands and wives structure domestic responsibilities and childcare or whose job prospects get higher priorities. Couples may follow traditional gender patterns or forge creative ungendered paths.

A general concern arises from surveys suggesting that Millennials are a questioning bunch and are leery of societal institutions.⁴⁵ How can we convince young adults in their early 20s that building a life on top of a societal institution like marriage isn’t a strange idea? We suspect the best response to this may simply be to do a better job of showing young adults the real stories of real people like themselves who have adopted a contemporary cornerstone model and have found strength and happiness in that path.

Counter-Cultural Couples. A cornerstone model of marriage is not without its potential weaknesses. Still, those problems are not so daunting that they prevent all young adults from making the commitment to marriage. In fact, there is a substantial minority of young adults marrying in their early and mid-20s who seem to have embraced a counter-cultural pattern of building a life on a foundation of marriage rather than crowning a young adult life with a matrimonial capstone. At age 25, more than 30% of young adults have married (and another 25% desire to be married).⁴⁶

Some counter-cultural couples are even boldly blogging about their doubts about the capstone model and their personal experiences with early marriage. In an essay for *Newsweek*, Megan McArdle wrote:

Marriage used to be the event that marked your passage into adulthood—the cornerstone of an adult life. Now it’s the capstone, the last thing you do after all the other foundations are in place. ... While we certainly shouldn’t go back to the era when men and especially women had no choice but to marry young, maybe it’s time to revisit the notion that marriage should wait until all the other parts of your life are figured out. If people started looking around for a spouse in their early 20s instead of five or 10 years later, fewer educated women might find themselves on the wrong side of the fertility curve—and women without college diplomas might find it easier to hold off on having children until they were in a long-term, stable relationship.⁴⁷

Blogging for *Slate*, Julia Shaw expressed her frustration with the capstone model and extolled the benefits of her marriage at age 23:

Marriage these days signals that you’ve figured out how to be a grown-up. You’ve played the field, backpacked Europe, and held a bartending gig to supplement an unpaid internship. You’ve “arrived,” having finished school, settled into a career path, bought a condo, figured out who you are, and found your soul mate. The fairytale wedding is your gateway into adult life. But in my experience, this idea about marriage as the end of the road is pretty misguided and means couples are missing out on a lot of the fun. ...

Marriage wasn’t something [my husband and I] did after we’d grown up—it was how we have grown up and grown together. We’ve endured the hardships of typical millennials: job searches, job losses, family deaths, family conflict, financial fears, and career concerns. The stability, companionship, and intimacy of marriage enabled us to overcome our challenges and develop as individuals and a couple. We learned how to be strong for one another, to comfort, to counsel, and to share our joys and not just our problems. ... Sometimes people delay marriage because they are searching for the perfect soul mate. But that view has it backward. Your spouse becomes your soul mate after you’ve made those vows to each other in front of God and the people who matter to you. You don’t marry someone because he’s your soul mate; he becomes your soul mate because you married him.⁴⁸

The *Blaze* blogger Matt Walsh has found some flaws in the capstone model and some gems in the cornerstone model:

There’s a very basic and very lethal flaw in the “I’ll get married once everything is perfect in my life” philosophy. Actually, two. First, nothing will ever be perfect. Sorry. Second, a big advantage to marriage is that it gives you the wonderful opportunity to traverse the peaks and valleys of life with your husband or wife beside you. ... [Millennials are] young. We’re risk takers. Thrill seekers. We’re bold and ambitious. We’re the strivers, the dreamers, the fighters, the revolutionaries. So if you really want to do something bold and beautiful with your youth—love someone, commit to

*them, have kids, forge a place in this world for you and your family.*⁴⁹

While the capstone model of marriage may currently be most popular, many young adults may be more open to earlier marriage than we often suppose. Perhaps the capstone model is not so hegemonic; there is room for those who see young adult life differently, who want to make marriage the adventure of their young lives rather than a settling down from youthful escapades. The way these bloggers write, it even sounds a bit trendy—retro chic—to make the adventurous but uncertain journey through the young adult years with a best friend–spouse than to go it alone.

Opening up more cultural space and social permission and support for young adults to marry at different (and younger) ages makes sense. Individual lives are vastly different; people are not stamped out in social factories. Why would we think that one set of blueprints for building a successful marriage should work for all? Sure, some young adults are not even close to ready for marriage in their early 20s. The new

capstone approach might work best for them, if they can avoid some of its common pitfalls. But others are ready and willing for the commitment to marriage. Telling them they should wait until they have checked off a predetermined, uniform list of individual accomplishments and 20-something adventures is strangely conformist.

Let's celebrate and be supportive when young adults make a well-thought-out choice to make marriage a cornerstone of their early adult lives, rather than expressing disappointment and distrust with their decision to forego the socially approved capstone model that insists on a certain chronological characteristic for marriage. Marriage doesn't have to be a crowning capstone that signals a status of successful young adult achievement, a status that many will find difficult to attain. For many, it can be the foundation on which to build together all the walls and windows and rooms of a successful and happy life. And it can be the apex that supports a set of important decisions about what is most important and how to get there.

Endnotes

¹ Scholars who contributed to writing this essay include: Alan J. Hawkins, Brian J. Willoughby, Jason S. Carroll, and Dean M. Busby.

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