

Marriage with Family at Its Center

In trying times, spouses realize that the core of their relationship is caring for children, relatives and one another

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On March 13—the day my wife informed me that our weekend date night was off because our governor had declared a state of emergency—I had an inkling that big changes were in store for our marriage. A few days later, as we found ourselves barely managing to home-school six children, work two jobs and run a big household on lockdown, I knew that the loss of a regular date night was going to be the least of our marital challenges. Scenarios like ours—and ones much, much harder, with millions of parents losing jobs, heading to the front lines to battle the virus or grieving the loss of loved ones—are playing out in homes across America.

There is no doubt that the fallout of this pandemic will exact a toll on marriage in America. The marriage rate will fall, as fewer men and women have the confidence to head to the altar amid the greatest recession in our lifetime—much as the marriage rate fell in the wake of the Great Recession.

For those who are already married, the stresses and strains of marriage and family life in the time of Covid-19 will send thousands of couples to divorce court. Marital failure will be especially common for husbands and wives under the sway of what I call the “soul mate model” of marriage. The soul mate model—trumpeted in books like Elizabeth Gilbert’s “Eat, Pray, Love,” not to mention countless songs and rom-coms—is the idea that marriage is primarily about an intense emotional and romantic connection between two people and should last only so long as that connection remains happy and fulfilling for both parties. This self-centered model gained in popularity for many Americans starting in the 1970s, the “Me Decade.”

But feelings are a fragile foundation for marriage. A recent YouGov survey indicates that married people in California who hold this view of marriage are about 60% more likely to think their marriage might end in divorce, compared with those who have a more family-first model of marriage, believing that “Marriage is about romance but also the kids, money, raising a family together.” No doubt the disappearance of date nights and so much more in today’s trying times will undo many marriages founded on the idea that marriage is supposed to make you feel good all the time.

The silver lining here is that—in the face of so much trauma and economic dislocation—most marriages will not collapse, and many will instead emerge stronger and more stable as husbands and wives develop a new appreciation for how much they love and depend on their spouse—and how much they, their kids and their kin depend on them keeping their marriage together. As I wrote a decade ago about the Great Recession, the hardship “led many Americans to deepen their commitment to marriage and, in some cases, to table or cancel their plans to divorce or separate.” In fact, the divorce rate dropped in the immediate wake of that economic downturn and has

fallen more than 20% over the last decade. The divorce rate is likely to fall even faster in the wake of this new crisis.

That's because in times of trial and tribulation, most people—and most spouses—don't become more self-centered, they become more other-centered, more cognizant of how much they need their family members to navigate difficult and dark times. In post-Covid-19 America, I'm confident that the family-first model of marriage will gain ground against the soul mate model.

As for me and my bride, we didn't enjoy a date night last weekend, but I was able to deliver food, some socially distanced conversation and air hugs from the grandchildren to my homebound 70-something in-laws. And it felt better than date night.