

William J. Doherty (2001). *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*. Chapter 2. New York: Guilford Press.

RESISTING CONSUMER MARRIAGE

I want to tell you about Cheryl, who had been married for 17 years, with two teenage daughters. About a year ago, she began an affair with a man she knew professionally. Her job took her out of town about once a month, when she and her lover got together for great sex and conversation. Right now, her lover, recently divorced from his wife, was pressing Cheryl for a commitment to leave her husband and be with him.

I asked about her marriage. She said that her husband was a very good man—“kind and loving and supportive” were her words—but that the marriage lacked passion for her. She had felt emotionally empty for a number of years. They were doing a good job raising their children, she thought. They rarely argued. Their sexual relationship had been blah for many years—infrequent and unexciting. Her husband had supported her career decisions, although they did not share many outside interests. In fact, he was so supportive and constructive that she was confident that he would not abandon her or be mean-spirited if she told him about the affair. Although being hurt terribly, he would work to make things better, she said. But Cheryl told herself and me that she deserved more out of life and marriage than she felt she could get from her husband. It was fear of hurting her children that was most stopping her from leaving. They would be devastated, she thought, and their lives turned upside down, especially if she was the one to move out and away to the community where her lover lived.

Cheryl was facing what she called a "churning dilemma." She didn't "fall" into the affair, she noted; she had clearly decided to pursue something she felt she needed and deserved in her life. Her lover gave her more than her husband; she felt far better when she was with him. Their conversations were deeper and their sex more thrilling. After years of passively accepting a loving but blah marriage, she felt that she had come alive after being kissed by a man who had been her friend but soon became her lover.

I don't want to portray Cheryl as hopelessly self-centered; in fact, she was very concerned about the effects of her actions on her family. Cheryl struck me as a good and sensitive person caught between her conscience and her desires for more in her life. But she spoke about her personal desires as if they were constitutional rights, such as freedom of speech, and her emotional needs as if they were biological facts, such as needing vitamin C to avoid scurvy. Our culture teaches us that we are all entitled to an exciting marriage and great sex life; if we don't get both, we are apt to feel deprived. What used to be seen as human weakness of the flesh has become a personal entitlement.

Social historians have shown how psychological individualism has been growing in our nation for more than a century. Its current form is what I call the consumer attitude, a combination of the human potential movement of the 1970s (with its focus on personal growth) and the market values of the 1980s and 1990s (with their focus on personal entitlement and cutting your losses and moving on if you are not satisfied).

Although it lurks inside nearly every married person who lives in our culture, the consumer attitude usually does not become apparent until we come face to face with our disappointments about our marriage and our mate. That's when we start to ask ourselves, "Is this marriage meeting my needs?" and "Am I getting enough back for what I am

putting into this marriage?" In Cheryl's case, she had told herself for years that she was staying in the marriage only for the sake of the children. She had "settled" for a second-class marriage in a world that tells us not to settle for second best, because a better product or service is beckoning. Hence she was vulnerable to enticements of a new relationship that looked like it could make her truly happy.

I invite you to train your ear to the sound of consumer marriage in the world around you and in your own head. The sound is easiest to detect in the media, culture, and other people's marriages, like Cheryl's. So we will start outside. And then we will listen inside our own marriages, yours and mine.

CONSUMER MARRIAGE IN THE MEDIA AND CULTURE

We talked before about how marketers for Honda and Levi's have picked up the consumer marriage theme. Here are some other media and cultural snippets: A *New York Times* journalist reports hearing a guest at a wedding reception, presumably a relative of the groom, say about the bride: "She will make a nice first wife for Jason." One national family expert endorses what she terms "starter marriages" -- marriages that are good learning experiences but not likely to endure. Does this make you think of a "starter house" that you expect to sell once you can afford something better? A California futurologist uses the term "ice-breaker" marriage to mean the same thing. Feminist social critic Barbara Ehrenreich in a *Time* magazine piece on predicting the future of male-female relationships, trumpets "renewable marriages," which "get re-evaluated every five to seven years, after which they can be revised, recelebrated, or dissolved with no, or at least fewer, hard feelings." These critics of marriage make a good point in stressing the importance of renewing marital commitment time and again, but their skepticism about

permanent commitment ironically makes it less likely that couples will last long enough to renew their marriages again and again.

What we used to think of as our first love—our first intense dating relationship when we were immature and not ready for a commitment—has now become our first marriage. And what we used to think of as a contract with a bank—for a five-year renewable mortgage—has become the metaphor for our marriages.

Listen also for our contemporary humor about marriage. A joke I heard when I visited the Boston area goes this way: “When choosing a husband, ask yourself if this is the man you want your children to visit every other weekend.” A character in a recent movie says that men should be like toilet paper: soft, strong, and disposable. A woman in a New Yorker cartoon tells her friend, “He’s very well off. He’s got all the quantities I admire.”

Having a spouse or leaving a spouse increasingly sounds like a consumer purchase or sale decision. Interviewed about her life, a never-married woman with two small children tells the New York Times, “I’m a single mother. It’s just me. At a certain age I realized I didn’t want to be a wife. Now I can see why some women have husbands. It’s kind of a convenience.” An expert on extramarital affairs, when asked by Psychology Today whether she ever counsels people directly to leave a relationship, replies in the language of the market place: “Leaving a bad marriage without trying to repair it first is like buying high and selling low. Better to see how good you can make it, then look at it and ask: Is this good enough?” Of course there is wisdom in this advice, but I also find it chilling. The same advice would apply to a new car that needs repairs.

Beyond listening to contemporary discourse, just look at contemporary behavior. A Philadelphia couple who desired a more expensive wedding than they could afford got twenty-four companies to sponsor the wedding in exchange for having their company names appear six times on everything from the invitations to the thank-you notes. And look at the February 2000 television show “Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire,” in which fifty women competed for selection by a rich man, followed by an immediate wedding on national television. To no one's surprise, the marriage ended promptly, but it did rivet the nation's attention for a time. Even the *Wall Street Journal*, no enemy of the marketplace, editorialized that this show, and the cautions the producers took (such as prenuptial agreements and venereal disease checks), represented “the dominant view of marriage in today's America: less a partnership than a joint venture between two parties concerned with preserving their own autonomy.”

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Let me put Consumer Marriage in a bigger context. Around 1880, the mass manufacture of consumer goods brought mass advertising and a new era in American history. The era of the consumer was born. Advertisers realized that the key to successful marketing was convincing potential customers that they couldn't do without the product. Sometimes this meant defining new problems, such as bad breath and hairy legs, that new products would fix. If a company's product was indistinguishable in quality from another's—say, with gasoline, soft drinks, or cigarettes—then advertisers learned to sell an image, a sense of belonging, of having made it, of being with it. We came to define ourselves by what we bought, and exposure to an estimated three thousand ads per day helps us to decide who we are.

Consumer culture has always been based on individuals pursuing their personal desires. But in the late twentieth century, advertisers began to emphasize desire for desire's sake. An example is Sprite's: "Obey your thirst." A Toyota ad campaign has a voiceover saying to a father, "Your kids always get what they want; now it's your turn." Consumer culture has always been one of self-gratification, but the entitlement dimension is more prominent now.

Lest I seem to be against markets and against consumption, let me reassure you. From my perspective, there is no viable alternative to free-market democratic systems, and no feasible way to eliminate advertising without wreaking havoc on the economy, throwing millions of people out of work, and creating unworkable government bureaucracies. Consumer spending is the primary fuel of a free-market economy, and consumer spending relies on advertising to potential customers. Mass advertising is the only way that new businesses and new products can get the attention of consumers. The markets and advertising need to be regulated for fairness, and advertising should probably be banned for young children, but the marketplace is here to stay, as is the consumer orientation it supports.

My concern is less with consumer culture in the marketplace than with what it is teaching us about our family relationships. Consumer culture tells us that we never have enough of anything we want, that the new is always better than the old—unless something old becomes trendy again. It teaches us not to be loyal to anything or anyone that does not continue to meet our needs at the right price. Customers are inherently disloyal. I want to support American workers, but have always bought Japanese cars because I see them as superior to American cars for the price. I eat Cheerios for breakfast

every day, but if the price gets too much higher than Special K, my second choice, I will abandon Cheerios. Or if General Mills changes the recipe, I might jump ship. I owe nothing to those who sell to me except my money, which I can stop giving at any time.

We Americans are also less loyal to our neighborhoods and communities than in the past; we move where there are jobs and where we can afford to live. Who asks nowadays whether you should not move because the neighborhood needs you? I know families who have chosen to stay in declining neighborhoods because they are involved in their community and because they don't want to encourage more middle class flight from the inner city, but mostly we live where we can meet our personal and family needs. We are less loyal to particular religious denominations, churches, and other faith communities; we shop for the best religious experience.

Our children have picked up this consumer attitude, as I pointed out in Take Back Your Kids. When reminded by his father to do his chore of mowing the lawn, a 15-year-old boy replied, "It's not my lawn." When an 11-year-old boy failed to thank his father for a Hanukkah gift, his mother admonished him for not saying "thank you." The boy's response: "Why should I? I don't like it." These were "good kids," not problem kids, in good families with loving parents, but influenced by the individualistic consumer culture. A 16-year-old girl was incredulous that anyone would expect to have a common family dinner on a regular basis. With complete innocence, she asked a National Public Radio reporter, "How can we be expected to eat together if we are not all hungry at the same time?" Children have come to see themselves, under our tutelage and that of the marketplace, only as consumers of parental and community services and not as citizens with responsibilities to families and communities.

Even in parents' attitudes toward their children, I see the creeping language of the me-first consumer culture. In the past decade I have begun to hear parents of teenagers say things like "What am I getting out of being a parent to this kid?" and "When I do start to get something in return?" These parents love their children but are stressed by the job of parenting. It was when I began to hear this kind of cost-benefit consumer language from well-intentioned parents that I decided to start speaking out. It's insidious, and it leads good people to do bad things in their families and communities. An upper middle class father with plenty of resources tells his wife that he cannot take the stress of their 16 year old daughter's behavior problems. "She is trying to tear us apart," he declares, and tells his wife that either their daughter leaves or he leaves. The daughter gets the messages and moves out, returning later pregnant and on drugs. In the late 1960's, shelter were set up for teens who ran away from what they thought were over-controlling parents. In Minneapolis, the oldest such shelter now has a bigger category of youth than "runaways." The majority now fits the category of "throwaway youth" whose parents have said "enough." I should point out that the behavior of most of these youth is not worse than in previous generations. What has changed is parents' commitment to accept long periods where their "costs" outweigh their "benefits" from the difficult job of parenting. I find it a frightening trend.

It is not surprising that in this new consumer world, we are less loyal to our mates, to our marriages. And when a marriage breaks up, it is not surprising that one of the parents exits from the children's lives to create a new life and a new family. I know a number of fathers who invest emotionally and financially in the children of their new wife but let go of their obligations to their own children who stay with their old wife.

These men have cut their losses and moved on. And it's not just fathers. One woman told me that her mother's parting words, upon leaving the family, were that she needed to pursue her dreams in life.

That was a common exit line in the 1970's, and the consumer version of it continues to this day. Elaine, a woman who suddenly left her empty but low-conflict marriage, decided to live with a friend who did not have space for her teenage daughter, who was left with her stepfather, feeling rejected and abandoned. When asked for an explanation, Elaine explained that she had decided she needed to start making own needs a higher priority. She had felt "stuck" and decided one weekend to act, because life is short. In a dramatic family therapy session in which Elaine gave this explanation for her actions, Elaine's stepdaughter (her husband's child) expressed admiration for this woman who would make a decision to "go for it" to have a better life. (I felt like I was listening to a beer commercial about "going for the gusto" because "we only go around once in life.") Elaine's own daughter turned to her step-sister and quietly uttered the most powerful refutation I have ever heard in a therapy session: "But she's got kids." Elaine's jaw dropped. Shortly after this confrontation, she moved to her own apartment and took her daughter in. But a lot of damage had been done. The good news is that Elaine over time recovered her sense of responsibility and became a real mother to her daughter. The marriage did not survive, however.

It is not new to our species that people abandon their responsibilities. We are all weak at times, and all tempted. What's new is the cultural support for a my-needs-first approach to life, an invisible but powerful chemical in the air we breathe.

The sociologist Arlie Hochschild observed that in the new American lifestyle, rootlessness occurs on a global scale. “We move not only from one job to another, but from one spouse—and sometimes one set of children—to the next. We are changing from a society that values employment and marriage to one that values employability and marriageability.” You see, it is your ability to love, not the people you love, that counts as a permanent asset in the consumer culture of relationships. Any particular relationship may not continue to satisfy your needs, but you will be happy in life if you have the skills to attract and land a new lover. This approach has merit when seeking a lifelong mate (after all, most love relationships break up before marriage), but when it carries over into marriage itself, we keep our romantic resumes up to date in case this marriage does not work out. This tentativeness then makes the marriage less likely to work out.

What happens when we approach marriage and family life as entrepreneurs? When the initial glow fades and the tough times come, we are prepared to cut our losses, to take what we want from our old marriages in order to forge new, more perfect unions until they also must be dissolved. Where does it end? Even worse than the results of business layoffs, there are few soft landings after marital downsizing.

During the go-go economic years of the 1980s and 1990s, when market economies triumphed over socialist economies all over the world, the consumer culture captured the hearts—and marriages—of Americans in new ways. (As I said before, the consumer ethic of relationships was the culmination of the spirit of individualism that has been growing gradually for more than a century.) Mid-twentieth century marriage, which featured high expectations for personal satisfaction, mutated into consumer marriage, with the same high psychological expectations but now spiced with a sense of entitlement

and impermanence. The chief value of consumer marriage is making sure that one's needs are being met and that one's options are always open.

In practice, most couples embrace a variety of values for their marriage, including the values of responsibility and commitment. It's not that we suddenly have become selfish louts. But these values are always in danger of being trumped by the consumer values of personal gain, low cost, entitlement, and hedging one's bets. In consumer culture, the exit door is always accessible. Commitments last as long as the other person is meeting our needs. We still believe in commitment, but powerful voices coming from inside and outside tell us that we are suckers if we settle for less than we think we need and deserve in our marriage.

CONSUMER MARRIAGE AND UNNECESSARY DIVORCE

Reasons people give for getting a divorce reveal how they think about marital commitment. I have seen a shift over nearly twenty-five years of practice as a marriage and family therapist. I don't mean to say that most people are not experiencing real emotional pain at the time they decide to end their marriages. It's just that the reasons they give are far different from the hard, nasty problems that propelled spouses in previous generations to divorce: abuse, abandonment, chronic alcoholism, infidelity. When one's spouse will not change these behaviors, divorce may be necessary. My concern is with unnecessary divorces stemming from the consumer culture of marriage.

Nowadays many people explain their reasons for divorce in the form of disappointment in what they are getting from their marriage, rather than in the form of an unconscionable breakdown of marital responsibilities. Here are phrases that I hear in my therapy practice and in my personal life.

The relationship wasn't working for me anymore.

Our needs were just too different.

I wasn't happy.

We just grew apart.

I grew and he didn't.

She has changed too much.

I deserve more.

We are not the same people we were when we got married.

After the children left home, there was nothing left.

The relationship became stale.

My husband was a nice guy, but boring.

We had no real intimacy. What kind of role model is that for the kids?

I used to take many of these as valid reasons to end a marriage. If the marriage is not meeting your needs, especially if you have tried hard to change it, then it is reasonable to leave. In the last decade, however, I grew more doubtful after seeing the ongoing ravages of divorce for both adults and children, and after seeing people end their second or third marriages for the same reasons. As I will describe more fully in chapter 7, you can work your way out of a reasonably good marriage by focusing on what you are not getting out of it and turning negative toward your mate--who will in turn give you even less and thereby help justify your leaving.

I think of a husband who could not accept the fact that his wife had gone back to graduate school and become a religious liberal instead of a religious conservative. He felt personally affronted by her changes, and hounded her out of the marriage. She was

an emotional wreck by the time she decided to divorce, and then he acted as if the divorce was her doing. Theirs had been an okay marriage, not a wonderful one, and good for their children. I used to explain this kind of divorce in neutral terms such as "they grew in different directions," or "she outgrew him," or "he was too rigid for her." But nowadays I see the husband as responsible for creating an unnecessary divorce by his refusal to deal with his disappointment in his wife's changes. In retrospect, I wish I had challenged him more strongly about this, on moral grounds, because he was acting as if she had broken the deal that no one was allowed to change.

This couple's story is a good example of how an unnecessary divorce at one stage can turn into a necessary divorce later on. The wife was justified in leaving, in my view, because the marriage had become emotionally unbearable. I don't want to oversimplify this case, because their problems reflected personal vulnerabilities on both their parts as well as a traditional male attitude towards a wife who pursues her personal goals. But the marriage became unbearable partly because the husband became a dissatisfied marital customer and chronic complainer.

On a personal level, as my own marriage has endured for nearly thirty years now, I have come to value this kind of permanent bond more than when I was younger, even if it does not meet all of my needs or my wife's needs. A shared long life, starting out young and then growing old together, having birthed and nurtured children into adulthood and the start of their own families, makes the rewards of a long-term committed marriage surpass those of any other kind of relationship. The paradox here is that you get these rewards only when you don't keep focusing on the rewards. Remember Beatrice's Arthur's line, "Don't look for happiness...it will only make you miserable."

Starting in the 1990s, in my writings for other therapists, I began to point out the therapeutic bias toward individual satisfaction as against family responsibilities and obligations. Gradually I began to listen differently to people's justifications for ending their marriages. I came to hear them like customer complaints, like someone explaining why they want to trade in a car for a new model, sell a house, or get rid of an old coat. Again, I recognize that people can become genuinely distressed about personal dissatisfactions in their marriage. But these new reasons often come down to saying that my psychological needs are not getting met in my marital lifestyle or that my mate is not doing an adequate job of meeting my needs.

There is another paradox here, because I also believe in advocating for oneself in marriage. Each spouse has genuine human needs to be treated with love, fairness, and respect. Being a patsy for a spouse's manipulation is not good for the marriage or oneself. When your spouse tries to control what you think or feel, you have to assert your boundaries. When your spouse treats you unfairly, you have to speak up. When your spouse fails to follow through on agreed-upon responsibilities, you have to confront him or her. These are all things I believe as a marital therapist, and they are not examples of consumer marriage.

Consumer marriage enters the picture when I focus mainly on what I am not getting in the marriage and on how my mate is not meeting my needs. I am in consumer mode when I fail to look at my own limitations, when I continually compare my spouse or marriage to my fantasies of other relationships, when I confuse my desires with my needs, when I lose the distinction between behavior that is completely unacceptable (such as physical abuse, infidelity, alcoholism, emotional cruelty, and chronic lying) and

behavior that bothers me or saddens me (such as a spouse not giving me enough affection or emotional support, working excessive hours, showing lack of sexual interest, or having certain unlikable personality characteristics). The consumer attitude turns marital disappointments into marital tragedies, and constructive efforts for improvement into entitled demands for change.

Here is a consumer marriage that ended in an unnecessary divorce: Sidney, recently retired and in a new second marriage to a woman in the prime of her career, dwelled continually on her work commitments and lack of availability to him. Like all couples, they had personal and relational difficulties that complicated their marriage, but what killed their relationship in the end was the fact that Sidney became an increasingly disgruntled and resentful customer for his wife Mary's time and services. Although Mary did not start out speaking in consumer terms, she eventually did so by announcing that it was not in her best interests to jeopardize her career goals for a shaky marriage. This was a particularly sad ending to marital therapy, because neither really wanted to end the marriage, but the forces of individual self-interest finally overwhelmed their commitment.

Again, I want to stress that most people who are considering ending their marriages for what I could term “soft” reasons are genuinely distressed and in pain. When we expect our needs to be met by others, we can be mightily frustrated when they don't come through. The bar of our frustration tolerance gets lower and lower, and as good consumers, we look outside of ourselves for where the change should come from. When this attitude is combined with the inevitable personal weaknesses and family-of-origin baggage we bring into marriage, the glue often does not hold.

In the past, all I needed to support a decision to end a non-abusive marriage was the statement that the marriage was now a source of pain and disappointment and that the love was gone. What I now see more clearly is that this pain and distress often come after years of dwelling on what one is not getting from the marriage, of complaining about the spouse's failings, of listening to the spouse defend and criticize back, of comparing one's marriage to other imagined relationships, and of gradually becoming more distant and resentful. In other words, after years living in a consumer marriage. A sense of personal entitlement to a high-quality marriage leads us to a focus on what is wrong with the other person, which leads to more things going wrong, and eventually to misery, which justifies leaving.

THE CONSUMER MARRIAGE AT HOME

Now we get to the most personal part: how the consumer culture affects our own marriages. It is impossible to live in American society without absorbing a good dose of the consumer culture of marriage. The problem with courtship is that it appears to fulfill the promise of consumer marriage. So when we start to realize, "Hey, this is getting to be a lot of work!" many of us find our minds invaded by consumerist thoughts and confusions. A current television commercial shows a couple running a restaurant and the wife saying, in a soft, almost romantic tone of voice, that running a family business "is a lot like marriage--a little work and a lot of love." Wrong about business and wrong about marriage, both of which take a lot of work.

In long term marriages, consumer thinking insinuates itself in a number of different ways. First is when we realize that the deficiencies in our mate or our marriage are not likely to go away. A couch-potato husband realizes that his wife is not going to

become less busy after the children leave home; she just transfers her attentions to community projects. A wife realizes that getting older is not softening some of her husband's opinionated hard edges or reducing the frequency of his bouts of depression. Her moodiness does not get better after menopause. His obsessive worrying does not diminish after he retires; he just transfers it from his job to their money situation. She loosens up a bit over the years in their sexual relationship, but their love life is never going to be the "hang from the chandeliers" kind that he once dreamt of. He requires a reminder each year about her birthday, despite past tears and apologies when he would forget.

The second main time that consumerism manifests itself is after the couple has tried hard to make changes, say, in a marriage education experience or in therapy. Surely, we hope, a good course of personal or marital therapy will shape up my mate. Although often there is positive change from these experiences, the leopards we are married to don't often change their spots--or they change the wrong spots. Even if I see that I too contribute to the problems or limitations of my marriage, at some point in midlife I will probably face the reality that this relationship, the one we created together, has some built-in negative patterns that are here to stay. It's kind of like living with your own body for many decades; you know which parts are going to continue to creak and let you down.

Therapy and marriage education can help us change what we can change in ourselves and our relationships, but they can be dangerous if they set up the expectation that we should be rid of the flaws and painful parts of our marriage. (I am saying here in secular terms what the great religions of the world teach about human life.) At the end

of therapy I often tell couples that their core strengths and core weaknesses will always be with them. The trick is to build on the strengths and contain and soften the impact of the weaknesses when they show themselves, especially in times of stress.

The third way that consumer thinking shows up in long term marriages is when there is a change in how one of the spouses functions. I think of a couple, married 30 years, where the husband had always wanted his wife to be involved in physical activities with him--biking, kayaking, hiking. She complied with his wishes as a good sport, and for the good of the marriage, until she developed back problems that gave her an unarguable excuse to stop doing things she had not enjoyed. He couldn't quite blame her for saying "no," but he suspected (rightly) that she was not motivated to get her back into the kind of shape that would allow her to join him again in these activities. He was now a solo exerciser for the first time. This is a critical time for their relationship, because the husband runs the risk of feeling sorry for himself and seeing his wife as a lesser provider of marital services. These feelings can set him up for temptation. More serious problems can occur when one of the spouses comes down with a chronic illness that seriously affects his or her ability to give to the other spouse. A marriage based mainly on consumer expectations will not survive.

The fourth consumer path is the way of comparisons. In the consumer model, we are always looking for newer and better models, even if we are basically satisfied with the one we have. The economy is based on comparisons between the good and the better. The Pentium three chip will give me double the computer power of the Pentium two chip. Who cares that what I have now is adequate? The most vibrant parts of the economy are based on quick obsolescence. In marriage, the temptation is always present to compare

your current spouse with a prospective one, especially when you are upset with your spouse. Even if you have no intention whatsoever of pursuing another relationship, the consumer virus of "comparisonitis" is an insidious one. A coworker, the spouse of a friend, a neighbor--anyone you get to know who has qualities that appear more attractive than your mate's--is a candidate for obsessing about how unfortunate you are for being married to the inadequate one you chose.

IS MY MARRIAGE BECOMING A CONSUMER MARRIAGE?

Ask yourself these questions to get a sense of how much consumer thinking has entered your marriage. If you answer "yes" to more than three of them, it might give you pause.

- 1. I regularly compare my spouse unfavorably with other men or women.**
- 2. I think mostly about my spouse's contributions to our problems, not my own.**
- 3. I think much more often about how my spouse is not meeting my needs than about how I am not meeting my spouse's needs.**
- 4. I find myself adding up by contributions to my marriage.**
- 5. I find myself thinking that my spouse is getting a better deal in this marriage than I am.**
- 6. It is much easier for me to focus on my spouse's defects than on his or her strengths.**
- 7. I wonder from time to time if I should have had higher standards when I chose a mate.**

8. When we have hard times, I tend to ask myself whether the effort I am putting into this marriage is worth the return I am getting.

The danger here is not just that we compare and fantasize--that is normal, human, and probably unavoidable. I remember a young family medicine intern who told a support group, with some embarrassment, that when she examined a very fit young man, she found herself attracted to him and wishing that her husband took care of himself the way this man did. The problem is not these passing thoughts, feelings, and fantasies. The danger is when we allow ourselves to dwell on these comparisons and tell ourselves how sad it is that we are living with someone who offers us less than we deserve. Of course, we generally have little clue about what this person would actually be like as a spouse, and whether any supposed advantages over our current mate in some areas would be dramatically offset by disadvantages in other areas. The extremely fit guy might also be extremely narcissistic and also expect you to have the same body beautiful that he does.

Cheryl, the woman having the affair, fell into three of these patterns of consumer thinking. She focused on her husband's limitations as an unexciting partner and on the blandness of her long marriage, and she did not look at her own contribution. She convinced her husband to do therapy with her several times over the years, but little changed in the area of her core concerns. This convinced her that the marriage could not be improved, leaving her a disgruntled consumer. When she allowed herself to be kissed by a new man, she went into a frenzy of comparisons, fueled in large part by her prior preoccupation with what she was missing in her marriage. She was like someone on a desert island where a bottle of ice cold Coke suddenly drops from the sky. (Maybe

intoxicating beer would be more appropriate.) She was unable to realistically evaluate the new relationship because she felt so thirsty for something new. And with both her husband and her lover, she was taking the consumer attitude of concentrating on what the other person was providing her or not providing her. One made her feel safe but passionless by tucking her in bed at night, and the other lit her fire.

Beyond these four general patterns of consumer thinking and attitudes in marriage, here is a list of specific thoughts and confusions that carry the musical themes of consumer marriage. I invite you to consider whether some of these tunes enter your mind at times.

- “I am not getting my needs met!” Turning wants into needs is what drives a market-based economy. Color television was once a want and is now a need. In the early years of my marriage, I confused a need for my wife to be supportive of my academic work interests with a want or desire for her to be personally interested in what I was interested in. When I confused my legitimate need for someone to listen and even cheer me on at times with a more narcissistic desire to have a mate who was my clone, I put unfair pressure on Leah. I eventually got over this by reminding myself that my wife did not have to meet all my wants, and could not in any event.

Discerning core needs from optional wants is a central task of resisting consumer marriage.

- “I deserve better!” Turning wants into needs leads to preoccupation with the sense of entitlement to something that we are not getting in our marriage. Of course, we are entitled to certain things from our mate, such as commitment, sexual fidelity, freedom from abuse, love, good will, and basic fairness. But

once the list of entitlements gets too long or detailed, we begin to feel like an entitled victim of our marriage. If I had dwelled on being entitled to a spouse who was enthusiastic about my intellectual passion of the moment (these interests actually change so fast that I don't know how that would be possible), then I would have hurt my marriage by feeling sorry for myself and resenting my wife. I have seen many spouses—wives, in particular—who work themselves out of their marriage by focusing on their being entitled to a mate who is warm, fuzzy, and able to share feelings on demand. Similarly, I have know many spouses—husbands, in particular—who justify their affairs on the basis that their mate is not sexually responsive enough. It's a slippery slope. .

- “If only I were married to that one!” As we discussed before, we never know what it's like to be married to someone other than the person we are with. If you find yourself dwelling on thoughts that someone else you meet or know has better marriage qualities than your current spouse, you are thinking like a misguided consumer. It may be that this person has certain traits in more abundance than your mate—smarter or more self-aware or better looking. But what you can't know is the downside that is revealed only in the furnace of married life—when smarter becomes patronizing or self-aware becomes self-obsessed or better looking becomes morbid fear of wrinkles. How do you resist comparing spouses? What most people do is to think positive thoughts about your partner and remind yourself that this is the one you are committed to and that you really know little about the other's mate potential.

- “My marriage is not as good as your marriage.” This is a variation on comparing spouses. When you see other couples who look happy and in love, do you ever feel envious of their marriage? If you dwell on this thought, you are likely to unnecessarily devalue your own marriage. I have worked with many couples who looked wonderful on the outside and were miserable on the inside. I remember a couple confessing their embarrassment at the effusive praise for their marriage at their 25th wedding anniversary celebration. Guests said they envied this marriage. No one there knew that they had not made love for two years and were constantly bickering when alone. In fact, no one knows, except the couple and maybe their marital therapist, what goes on in the heart of another marriage.
- “My spouse is a flawed person.” As I said before, dwelling on this thought is a common consumer thought pattern, fed by entitlement, confusion of wants and needs, and unnecessary comparisons. Remember, as a good consumer, that if you trade this mate in for a new model, you get a different set of flaws. And ask yourself whether the flaws you perceive are fatal or just bothersome. One client's spouse did have the fatal flaw of being a pedophile who would not seek help. Out he went. Another's spouse was physically violent, would not seek help, and blamed everyone else for his anger. Out he went too. But most spouse flaws are not this grave, and we can come to accept them and refocus our thinking and energy on the other person's positives. Andrew Christensen and Neil Jacobson have built an important new model of marital therapy around the theme of acceptance (see their book Reconcilable Differences). I know a woman who says she saved her marriage when she accepted the fact that her

husband, though he loved her deeply, did not know how to comfort her when she was emotionally distressed. She decided she could use her friends for that, and when she stopped expecting him to be perfectly empathetic, he was easier to be around when she was upset because he was less frightened of doing the wrong thing. Acceptance has a way of bringing out the best in all of us.

- “I’m the good guy here.” We all have a great capacity for self-justification.

In a recent poll, about 75% of divorced people thought they had worked hard to save the marriage, and only 25% thought that their ex-spouse had worked hard. Something does not add up here, since the ex-spouses were also part of the 75% group! The easiest way to play the game of consumer marriage is to focus on our own righteousness while downplaying our contributions to marital problems. Cheryl, the woman having the affair, did this. Since she was able to be passionate with her lover, the problem in her marriage could not have stemmed from her own failings; the fault must have been her husband’s. This is like saying that because I am happy on vacation, my unhappiness at home must be your fault. Self-justifying thoughts prepare you for pulling back or exiting, but you will take your tendency to self-justify into your next relationship.

What can we do instead of being an entitled customer in our marriages? In Cheryl's case, she could have seen the exciting kiss as a wake up call to look inward at her own contributions to her life dissatisfactions and to her empty marriage. When she decided to follow the call of a new romance, she focused instead on the thrill of the affair and the impossibility of her husband changing. The more difficult but responsible

approach would be to risk telling her husband bluntly about her frustrations and then either working hard for change or learning to live with these limitations without feeling victimized.

Cheryl ultimately took back her marriage. She ended the affair and started working on her relationship with her husband. Not without sadness, though, about letting go of the dream of consumer paradise in a permanent love affair. An emotional crisis with one of her children also helped to rivet her attention back on her family. She regained her marital commitment when she saw what was at stake—a long term marriage, a husband who loved her, children who depended on that marriage, and a community of people affected by the marriage. She had been focusing on what she was not getting from her marriage, what she was entitled to get, what flaws in her husband had created the gap, and how she would be happier with a new model of husband. In the end, she came to see that she held citizenship papers in her marriage and just a tourist visa in her affair.

The best way to keep the consumer culture from dominating your marriage is to see yourself as a citizen of your marriage, which is another way to say to be intentional, committed, and part of a community. Being a citizen of a marriage means taking responsibility to make things better and not just be passive, to value the marriage itself and not just your own interest in it, to struggle to make it better by naming problems and changing yourself first, to take the long view that values your history together as a couple over short-term pain and struggle, to accept the inevitable limitations and problems, to see how your marriage affects many other people in your world, and to hold onto the dream, never completely fulfilled, of a more perfect union.

