

# If love is the disease, marriage is the



Judy Gerstel

There's a lot of concern about how gay marriages are undermining the institution of marriage.

To be sure, marriage as we know it is crumbling into oblivion like a stale slice of white-frosted wedding cake preserved as a memento of a union since sundered.

Marriage is becoming more and more quaint, a vestigial option for people who feel the need to formalize and sanctify their partnership.

It's a lifestyle choice, rather like woodworking or golf — both of which often inspire more devotion, passion and lifelong commitment than does marriage.

We're still fascinated with marriage and weddings, of course. But it's not because of sentiment or tradition. Some of us are addicted to the wedding announcements in the New York Times Sunday Styles section because we're interested in the sheer bravado of it all, the ri-

diculous risk, the crazy odds and the people who team up to try their luck. (Okay, some of us are also low-minded enough to read the wedding announcements for the gossip: How important is the bride's family and why did she marry the son of a shoe salesman?)

There's a reason, after all, why the wedding announcement section is referred to as the women's sports pages.

But marriage isn't being attacked from the outside, by gays and lesbians storming the gates. Rather, the traditional monogamous marriage as we know it is imploding from the inside.

The sorry state of marriage will

be discussed this weekend by some of the 10,000 psychologists gathering here for the American Psychological Association convention at the Toronto Convention Centre.

For example, there's an all-day workshop beginning this morning on "Cognitive Behaviour Strategies and Techniques for Revitalizing Nonsexual Marriages."

Yes, it's that much of a problem.

Tomorrow, evolutionary psychologist David Buss will talk about love, conflict between the sexes and sexual treachery.

He's the author of books titled *The Evolution of Desire: Strate-*

*gies Of Human Mating* and *The Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is As Necessary As Love And Sex*.

He's estimated that 20 to 40 per cent of American women and 30 to 50 per cent of American men have at least one affair over the course of their marriage. And he quotes research arguing that the probability that either the husband or wife will have an affair (the affair rate for the couple) may be as high as 76 per cent.

Two years ago, the University of Texas professor published a scholarly paper on "Human Mate Poaching: Tactics and Temptation for Infiltrating Ex-

## cure

isting Mateships."

When we're looking, in the not-too-distant future, for a word to replace marriage and that old-fashioned concept of forsaking all others, "mateship" might just be the answer.

Another speaker at the convention this weekend is Lisa Firestone, a psychologist with the Glendon Institute in California and co-author of a new book, *Creating A Life of Meaning And Compassion*.

Firestone suggests that marriage may be in trouble because there's so much dishonesty in our culture around monogamy.

### ► Gerstel From D1

"I think monogamy hasn't necessarily been the norm," says Firestone, "but it has been what people pretended they're doing."

In her book, Firestone and her co-authors promote "free choice rather than obligation" for partners in a relationship.

"It's important to be honest and discuss not only what you're gaining with monogamy but also what you're losing..."

Firestone's critical view of the traditional marriage that takes monogamy for granted is echoed by cultural theorist Laura Kipnis.

Although she won't be attending the APA conference, Kipnis is set to make a splash with her new book, *Against Love: A Polemic*. Not in bookstores until the end of the month, it's the subject of a three-page review in the current *New Yorker* magazine: "In Kipnis's characterization, the domestic captivity that is marriage is complete and relentless, with surveillance, repression and prohibition built into its very structure."

The language of couples, observes Kipnis, is a catalogue of "strictures, commands and punishments so unending that you will begin to wonder why no one has yet invoked the Geneva Convention when it comes to couple relations."

Indeed, traditional marriages characterized by enforced monogamy, obligatory intimacy and passive-aggressive tactics is being declared an affront to human rights.

In *Creating A Life of Meaning And Compassion*, Firestone and her co-authors refer to studies

that "have delineated suppressive and coercive practices in interactions within these couples . . . Their findings indicate that individuals commit the most egregious human rights violations within their couple and family relationships."

Kipnis's solution: "Adultery is one way of protesting the confines of coupled life; of course there's always murder."

She questions the concept that relationships take work and wonders how we got to the point where "monogamy becomes labour, when desire is organized contractually, with accounts kept and fidelity extracted like labour from employees with marriage a domestic factory policed by means of rigid shop floor discipline."

Sticking with her simile, she suggests that "adultery is the sit-down strike of the love-takes-work ethic."

Kipnis disdains the idea of serial monogamy (which is being recognized as more realistic than "forsaking all others 'til

death do us part") because it preserves the institution, even if the inmates change. Rather, she's in favour of "something entirely different: yearly renewable contracts, for example."

Kipnis may be a provocateur and Firestone and her co-authors may be Californians but clearly the traditional, lifetime monogamous marriage is being abandoned and falling apart.

At this weekend's APA convention, some efforts are being made to shore up the creaky institution with better therapy for the inmates. But at the leading edge of the culture and already entering the mainstream, there's a trend, for better or for worse, to gut the institution of traditional marriage and to renovate coupledness — or mateship, if you prefer — from the ground up.

Adultery, writes Kipnis, "is at least a reliable way of proving to ourselves that we're not quite in the ground yet."

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