

November 12, 2006

What Do We Want in a Spouse? (3 Letters)

To the Editor:

Re “[Too Close for Comfort](#),” by Stephanie Coontz (Op-Ed, Nov. 7):

Today, we want from our spouses what we have always sought in marriage: companionship, economic support, children and respectability. But now we also want our partner to be our best friend, our trusted confidant and our passionate lover.

The problem is that we ask one person to give us what an entire village and extended family used to provide. No wonder our isolated domestic units crumble under the expectations.

Work may be one devouring source of this crisis, but so are the power of the romantic ideal that emphasizes togetherness above all else and the lack of social and institutional support in the United States, a country that loves to invest in marriage but fails to support parents.

Esther Perel

New York, Nov. 8, 2006

The writer is the author of a book about marriage.

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To the Editor:

Stephanie Coontz writes that “we need to restructure both work and social life so we can reach out and build ties with others, including people who are single or divorced.” That statement has never rung more true in my life than after my husband died a few years ago.

I found it extremely difficult to forge and maintain bonds with those I initially thought would become part of my support network, so entrenched were they with their own lives. Ironically, it is the friend with the most challenging and unconventional life who is the first to offer me assistance and to include my daughter and me in family events.

Regrettably, I am sure I was no different when I had a nuclear family life of my own. Painful lessons indeed.

J. Athanikar

Ann Arbor, Mich., Nov. 7, 2006

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To the Editor:

Not only does the expansion of the post-industrial economy drive us back to dependence on marriage, but it also strengthens several American cultural values, which add to marriages' demise.

We have an ingrained pride in our independence and our individuality, which acts to separate us from feeling responsible for a larger group or community. Americans constantly scream for their individual rights, when sometimes the rights of the group should prevail.

When coupled with our belief in healthy competition, we struggle with the problems of life in private, isolating ourselves from a group that should support us. We tend to turn to marriage for that needed support, which, as Ms. Coontz points out, strains the relationship.

In other cultures, Asia in particular, the importance of belonging to a group supersedes the right of the individual, and a natural support system evolves. Perhaps with globalization we can learn to embrace other cultural values and improve our relationships.

Lise U. Chase

Darien, Conn., Nov. 7, 2006

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