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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Too Close for Comfort

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EVER since the Census Bureau released figures last month showing that married-couple households are now a minority, my phone has been ringing off the hook with calls from people asking: "How can we save marriage? How can we make Americans understand that marriage is the most significant emotional connection they will ever make, the one place to find social support and personal fulfillment?"

I think these are the wrong questions — indeed, such questions would have been almost unimaginable through most of history. It has only been in the last century that Americans have put all their emotional eggs in the basket of coupled love. Because of this change, many of us have found joys in marriage our great-great-grandparents never did. But we have also neglected our other relationships, placing too many burdens on a fragile institution and making social life poorer in the process.

A study released this year showed just how dependent we've become on marriage. Three sociologists at the University of Arizona and Duke University found that from 1985 to 2004 Americans reported a marked decline in the number of people with whom they discussed meaningful matters. People reported fewer close relationships with co-workers, extended family members, neighbors and friends. The only close relationship where more people said they discussed important matters in 2004 than in 1985 was marriage.

In fact, the number of people who depended totally on a spouse for important conversations, with no other person to turn to, almost doubled, to 9.4 percent from 5 percent. Not surprisingly, the number of people saying they didn't have anyone in whom they confided nearly tripled.

The solution to this isolation is not to ramp up our emotional dependence on marriage. Until 100 years ago, most societies agreed that it was dangerously antisocial, even pathologically self-absorbed, to elevate marital affection and nuclear-family ties above commitments to neighbors, extended kin, civic duty and religion.

St. Paul complained that married men were more concerned with pleasing their wives than pleasing God. In John Adams's view, a "passion for the public good" was "superior to all private passions." In both England and America, moralists bewailed "excessive" married love, which encouraged "men and women to be always taken up with each other."

From medieval days until the early 19th century, diaries and letters more often used the word love to refer to neighbors, cousins and fellow church members than to spouses. When honeymoons first gained favor in the 19th century, couples often took along relatives or friends for company. Victorian novels and diaries were as passionate about brother-sister relationships and same-sex friendships as about marital ties.

The Victorian refusal to acknowledge strong sexual desires among respectable men and women gave people a wider outlet for intense emotions, including physical touch, than we see today. Men wrote matter-of-factly about retiring to bed with a male roommate, "and in each other's arms did friendship sink peacefully to sleep." Upright Victorian matrons thought nothing of kicking their husbands out of bed when a female friend came to visit. They spent the night kissing, hugging and pouring out their innermost thoughts.

By the early 20th century, though, the sea change in the culture wrought by the industrial economy had loosened social obligations to neighbors and kin, giving rise to the idea that individuals could meet their deepest needs only through romantic love, culminating in marriage. Under the influence of Freudianism, society began to view intense same-sex ties with suspicion and people were urged to reject the emotional claims of friends and relatives who might compete with a spouse for time and affection.

The insistence that marriage and parenthood could satisfy all an individual's needs reached a peak in the cult of "togetherness" among middle-class suburban Americans in the 1950s. Women were told that marriage and motherhood offered them complete fulfillment. Men were encouraged to let their wives take care of their social lives.

But many men and women found these prescriptions stifling. Women who entered the work force in the 1960s joyfully rediscovered social contacts and friendships outside the home.

"It was so stimulating to have real conversations with other people," a woman who lived through this period told me, "to go out after work with friends from the office or to have people over other than my husband's boss or our parents."

And women's lead in overturning the cult of 1950s marriage inspired many men to rediscover what earlier generations of men had taken for granted — that men need deep emotional connections with other men, not just their wives. Researchers soon found that men and women with confidants beyond the nuclear family were mentally and physically healthier than people who relied on just one other individual for emotional intimacy and support.

So why do we seem to be slipping back in this regard? It is not because most people have voluntarily embraced nuclear-family isolation. Indeed, the spread of "virtual" communities on the Internet speaks to a deep hunger to reach out to others.

Instead, it's the expansion of the post-industrial economy that seems to be driving us back to a new dependence on marriage. According to the researchers Kathleen Gerson and Jerry Jacobs, 60 percent of American married couples have both partners in the work force, up from 36 percent in 1970, and the average two-earner couple now works 82 hours a week.

This is probably why the time Americans spend socializing with others off the job has declined by almost 25 percent since 1965. Their free hours are spent with spouses, and as a study by Suzanne Bianchi of the University of Maryland released last month showed, with their children — mothers and fathers today spend even more time with their youngsters than parents did 40 years ago.

As Americans lose the wider face-to-face ties that build social trust, they become more dependent on romantic relationships for intimacy and deep communication, and more vulnerable to isolation if a relationship breaks down. In some cases we even cause the breakdown by loading the relationship with too many expectations. Marriage is generally based on more equality and deeper friendship than in the past, but even so, it is hard for it to compensate for the way that work has devoured time once spent cultivating friendships.

The solution is not to revive the failed marital experiment of the 1950s, as so many commentators noting the decline in married-couple households seem to want. Nor is it to lower our expectations that we'll find fulfillment and friendship in marriage.

Instead, we should raise our expectations for, and commitment to, other relationships, especially since so many people now live so much of their lives outside marriage. Paradoxically, we can strengthen our marriages the most by not expecting them to be our sole refuge from the pressures of the modern work force. Instead 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 indeed would be a return to marital tradition — not the 1950s model, but the pre-20th-century model that has a much more enduring pedigree.

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