

Soulmate Marriage: An Unrealistic Goal?

A recent edition of the *NPR* program “Hidden Brain” asked an increasingly prevalent question: “[When Did Marriage Become So Hard?](#)”

The idea that marriage is difficult is underscored by the fact that nearly [40 to 50 percent](#) of all marriages end in divorce. And although divorce rates are supposedly falling, the numbers of divorced couples are [far higher](#) than they were 100 or even 60 years ago.

Commenting on this phenomenon for *NPR*, social psychologist Eli Finkel suggests one possible reason for the change is that marriage “used to be... about basic economic survival.” Now, however, it has turned into a quest for self-actualization and self-esteem:

“We wanted to complement our emphasis on love, achieving love through marriage, with a new emphasis on achieving a sense of personal fulfillment in the way of personal growth. So in the terminology of psychology, we wanted to self-actualize through our marriage, we wanted to grow into a more authentic version of ourselves.”

In the process, Finkel implies we have created a monster, noting, “[A] marriage that would have been acceptable to us in the 1950s is a disappointment to us today because of those high expectations.”

This analysis is interesting, particularly as it is similar to something J.R.R. Tolkien observed and wrote about in a [1941 letter](#) to his son Michael:

“When the glamour wears off, or merely works a bit thin, they

think they have made a mistake, and that the real soulmate is still to find. The real soul-mate too often proves to be the next sexually attractive person that comes along. Someone whom they might indeed very profitably have married, if only —. Hence divorce, to provide the ‘if only’.”

But as Tolkien observes, such a view of marriage is completely unrealistic:

“[T]he essence of a fallen world is that the best cannot be attained by free enjoyment, or by what is called ‘self-realization’ (usually a nice name for self-indulgence, wholly inimical to the realization of other selves); but by denial, by suffering. ... Only a very wise man at the end of his life could make a sound judgement concerning whom, amongst the total possible chances, he ought most profitably to have married! Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes: in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might have found more suitable mates. But the ‘real soul-mate’ is the one you are actually married to.”

Do today’s Americans need to consider this lesson? Is it time we abandon our unrealistic expectations of marriage and embrace the denial and self-sacrifice the institution requires? And in doing so, would we actually achieve a much greater satisfaction in life?

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