

Should Women Stay Single?

Joseph Chamie, the former director of the United Nations Population Division, recently published an article entitled "[Should women stay single?](#)" It presents a grim view of married life, and seems to answer the question largely in the affirmative. Chamie [writes](#):

Single women generally experience fewer stresses and compromises than married women. Furthermore, single women feel more empowered, enjoying greater personal autonomy and freedoms than married women largely because they don't juggle challenging multiple roles at work and home.

... Meanwhile, people try alternatives to marriage. While marriage poses negative effects on women's health and longevity, [dog ownership](#) provides benefits for men and women, such as lower blood pressure and reduced cholesterol. Dogs readily express appreciation and provide nonjudgmental companionship.

... With greater gender equality, expanding opportunities for women and increasing individualism, women are more deliberate on making fateful decisions about marriage, with more deciding to remain single.

Chamie's words raise the question of what true freedom is, and what a good life is. Is the best life a life with the least stresses, the freedom to do anything, and no-one around to have to compromise with; a life in which you can experience as much pleasure as possible?

On the question of what makes a good life, Socrates said at his trial:

You, my friend—a citizen of the great and mighty and wise

city of Athens—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, something that you never consider or heed at all?’

... For I don't do anything except go around persuading you all, old and young, not to take thought for your social standing or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the great improvements of the soul.

The great philosophers of the past, such as Plato, Socrates and Aristotle, thought virtue more important than pleasure, wealth, or power.

Chamie presents a more hedonistic conception of the good life. It sounds attractive to have fewer annoyances to contend with, the autonomy to enjoy fine wine and leisurely afternoons, and the opportunity to focus solely on professional success which might well feel like it comes with more accolades than maintaining a home or bringing up children. Yet, take these to the extreme and you get selfishness, greediness, addiction, and laziness. Not to mention that society is in the midst of [a loneliness epidemic](#), partially as a result of smaller and less connected families.

Why is it that we don't particularly revere the image of the eternal pleasure seeker who lives purely for themselves? We don't tend to want people to say at our funeral that we lived a life of every pleasure on offer and never had to compromise; mostly we would rather they talked about our work ethic, sacrifice and love. Perhaps, because that is what we too really consider a good life to be.

In Socrates' view, the truly free person is someone who has overcome themselves, to live as simply as possible and have few wants. While counterintuitive, it makes sense that someone who exercises no control over their desires becomes a slave to themselves and is probably made unhappy by it.

Thus, those who do seek to develop virtue may find themselves with a greater sense of satisfaction and purpose in their lives. A sort of paradox where you perhaps have less immediate pleasure, but greater overall joy.

In this view, the challenge and sacrifice of family and love is indeed worth it. For one, both parenthood and marriage are profound experiences of personal growth in which spouses/parents are challenged to grow in virtue through denying their own immediate needs constantly, and overcoming all sort of challenging situations and tests of their patience. Watching my babies emerge into the world, I felt I encountered the miraculous and obtained a higher purpose. The highest professional success in a workplace, or the autonomy to do whatever I want when I want, still pale in comparison to the overwhelming love and joy gained – despite the very real suffering. The majority of wives I know genuinely love their husbands, love their babies and children, love the easy company of someone who is always there, and love having the love of family in their lives. It is a lot to give up.

But if Chamie is indeed right that many men are hard to live with, perhaps society needs to better articulate the self-giving love of marriage so that both men and women might better strive to live up to it. Perhaps parents need to try to bring up virtuous boys who do not seek the hedonistic lifestyle Chamie himself seems to advocate for women, thus making better husbands. But in my experience at least, while men may never have a women's eye for detail (I think it's fair to say that if you compare an all-girls flat or household to an all-boys flat or household you will often encounter differences in the form of small touches of beauty and detail), they are increasingly conscious of doing their fair share of work and childcare.

Though, over and above men's apparent unwillingness to contribute very much, Chamie writes that single women are

happier “largely because they don’t juggle challenging multiple roles at work and home.” Perhaps, then, society should envision a wider range of options for women than simply remaining single or juggling “multiple roles at work and home.” A more flexible job market is one answer for women who wish (or have) to maintain work, but consider creating a home under their own influence and care to be very important too.

Moreover, being a mother or homemaker should be viewed as a respected and attractive identity in its own right, rather than constantly belittled. If you take Chamie’s individualistic ideal to the extreme, there would be no future of humanity in just one generation, no babies or children at all. His isn’t a view which seems to take stock of the value of parents at all.

The family is fundamental to the life of every society, and it is a fallacy to think that mothers (or stay-at-home dads) aren’t contributing to the economy and fulfilling an important and necessary societal role. They are shaping the future generation who will fill a future workforce and, if brought up properly, hopefully be productive and virtuous.

Yet, parenthood is not a job that can be couched in purely economic or social terms. Parents are charged with the care of people they love, not widgets or nameless office staff, normally on autonomous terms. As Socrates defines the good life, it is certainly the stuff of “wisdom, truth and the greatest improvement of the soul,” as you struggle to be better for love of your children and future generations.

Great art, literature and music is so often about love or sacrifice. Let us not abandon humanity’s great vision of beauty, joy, virtue and sacrificial love, in return for one of individualistic and short-lived pleasure.

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