

Holy Matrimony versus Shacking Up!
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One of the joys of my life is marriage to a beautiful, virtuous woman who seems to defy age and only gets better with time. It's full of humor, shared faith and purpose, manageable conflicts, shared pain, and lots of chemistry as we dance to our favorite shag song, *Lady Soul* by the Temptations, a close second being Wilson Pickett's *Mustang Sally*. Since she was a Baptist and I a more-worldly Methodist, I taught her all she knows about dancing, the benefits of red wine, and reciting the Apostles' Creed!

Our romance, begun at a girl's field hockey game at Salem College (where I went one November as a Wake Forest sophomore to check out the freshman females!), moved through several stages: a first date after which we shook hands, a second and third date which included the exciting adventure of actually holding hands, seeing ourselves a couple for several years, becoming engaged and finally married thirty-seven years ago. I first introduced her with delight as, "This is my girlfriend Lori." After a diamond and a date for the wedding, my introduction changed, "This is my fiancé, Lori." Once we said "I do," I bestowed a noble title, "This is my wife, Lori? If this recitation sounds quaint and from another world, it is.

As a boy of eight I asked my parents, "What's it mean to *shack up*?" I'd heard the phrase and assumed it meant something like *camping out*. My inference turned out to be close to the mark!

After a panicked glance, they responded calmly, "It's when a man and woman live together unmarried."

When I followed up with an amazed, "Why do they do that?" there was no reply. It was 1961.

The offense of the phrase *shackin' up* soon morphed into the neutral *living together*, then on to the sociological precision of *cohabitation*. Since then it's again devolved to *hooking-up* and *friends with benefits*. It still sounds dishonest to me for a man who's been living with a woman for years to say, "This is my fiancé," when there's no ring and wedding date. It's a nod in the direction of virtue I find unconvincing.

Commitment and intimacy are meant to rise together toward marriage, but in

our day intimacy often rushes ahead of commitment because we test drive people like we test drive cars, always open to a better ride if it comes along. Perhaps this is why 80 percent of live-in relationships end before marriage or after it in divorce. Living with one after another develops an appetite for variety rather than the habit of fidelity. Along the way the capacity for monogamy is weakened. Domestic violence goes up, and children in such homes rank lower on all indicators of well-being. Cohabiting couples have more substance abuse and earn less income than their married peers.

In a culture where many young adults come from broken homes, I understand the appeal of a “let’s live together to see if it works.” But the research is in, and the news is not good, particularly for women and children. To use the title of a book on marriage by Glenn Stanton, *The Ring Makes All the Difference*.

There is a better way. It’s time for the guys to *grow-up* and *man-up*; it’s time for the ladies to give up the myth: *If I live with him, he’ll marry me*. I often marry couples who’ve been living together. Some choose to live apart during the engagement. Whatever their choice, I do the best I can through serious pre-marital counseling to prepare them, not just for a wedding, but for a marriage with a chance to go the distance.

If you’re interested in a conversation on these issues or in the possibility of a marriage with God at the center, let’s have a cup of coffee. I may even bring Lori with me; together we have more to offer on a topic around which so much hope and pain swirls. You are worth a wedding band, not just a shared address. Your dreams don’t have to die.
