HAPPIER EVER AFTER

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST David Myers is a man with a mission: to interpret psychology’s insights for a popular audience and to integrate those insights into a life of Christian faith. He is perhaps best known for his writings on happiness, including the book *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, in which he makes the case that our country’s rising affluence has not improved our collective well-being. He also has had much to say about marriage—the benefits of nurturing matrimonial bonds and the perils of their dissolution, for partners and for their children.

Most recently, Myers has taken on one of the most divisive topics of the day. In his book *What God Has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage*, Myers and co-author Letha Dawson Scanzoni call on those whose religious ideals lead them to be ambivalent about same-sex marriage to rethink their positions in light of recent social science research. The authors argue that homosexuality is a natural and lasting disposition, and that from biblical and scientific perspectives, marriage results in stronger, happier individuals and better societies. Supporting the institution of marriage, then, is in everybody’s best interest.

Myers told *Science & Spirit’s* Marianna Krejci-Papa why he wrote the book, what it is that makes us happy, and why marriage—for everyone—is something worth fighting for.

*Science & Spirit:* In your studies of happiness, have you found any groups of people who are happier than average?

*David Myers:* Happiness is about equally available to people of any age, gender, or race. Income increases beyond what’s...
needed for sustenance and security seem not to matter much. In the United States and other Western countries, the doubling of affluence over the last half-century has not increased our happiness by one iota, despite all the things you and I love about our lives today—from air conditioning to the Internet to Post-it notes. Happy lives are instead marked by positive traits, such as optimism and a sense of personal control; by close relationships; and by participation in faith communities that entail support, meaning, and hope.

**S&S:** Considering the failure rate of marriages in the United States, I was surprised to learn that married people—both men and women—rate themselves as happier than unmarried people. Is the difference significant?

**DM:** Forty percent of married people report that they are “very happy,” compared with only twenty-three percent of never-married adults. I don’t place much credence in Sigmund Freud, but he got this much right: The healthy adult, he said, is one who can love and work. Others have used different words for these two important domains: intimacy and generativity, affiliation and achievement, attachment and productivity. Regardless, satisfying lives are marked by close, supportive relationships and by meaningful commitments to tasks that take us beyond ourselves.

**S&S:** And those who practice a religion are more likely to be nurturing the qualities that make life satisfying?

**DM:** The percentage of “very happy” Americans ranges from twenty-six percent among those never engaged with a faith community to forty-seven percent for those engaged several times weekly. This comes from almost 43,000 Americans randomly sampled by the National Opinion Research Center over the years since 1972.

**S&S:** Homosexual couples cannot marry in most states, and many religious communities do not welcome them. The data you mention gives new urgency to the discussion of the rights and needs of homosexuals, as you write in your most recent and most controversial book to date. What motivated you to write *What God Has Joined Together*?

**DM:** As a Christian scholar-writer, my calling is to worship God with my mind and to give witness to the truth as best as I can discern it. I feel compelled to write when I become impressed by accumulating research that points to a different conclusion than what many people presume, leading me to think, “People should know about this.” Much as a geologist might feel moved to say, “Hey, friends, there’s now massive evidence that the earth is very old,” I felt compelled to offer into the public square evidence that drives me to conclude that sexual orientation is a natural and enduring disposition, and that the world would be a happier and healthier place if, for all people, love, sex, and marriage went together.

**S&S:** For whom did you write this book?

**DM:** My co-author, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, and I write as straight people of faith for fellow straight people of faith, especially those who are wrestling with the controversies over the ordination of gays and lesbians to church office and over the cultural movement toward same-sex unions and marriage. Our aim is to help bridge the divide between traditionalists, who feel keenly about the need to support marriage, and progressives, who see sexual orientation as a natural disposition to be lived out within the context of a covenantal partnership. We offer evidence that supports both sides and defines some common ground between them. The book is more of interest to those in the “muddled middle” than to those with sure convictions on the left and the right. In the “muddled middle” are folks who feel some ambivalence because they want to support marriage, uphold the integrity of Scripture, and support and extend grace to gays and lesbians, but are wondering if they can do all these things at once. We try to show how it is possible to respect the Bible as a guide for faith and life, and welcome all people, regardless of sexual orientation, into full citizenship in the church and the culture.

**S&S:** You point out in your book that the Bible talks about sexual acts, but not sexual orientation as it is understood today. How much of the Bible addresses sexual acts by people of the same sex?

**DM:** Seven biblical verses seem to condemn same-sex contact, out of 31,000 biblical verses. Among these seven, the context often suggests idolatry, violent rape, lust, exploitation, or promiscuity—which says nothing about a loving relationship between homosexuals. Anyone who does an online search of a main biblical translation, such as the New Revised Standard
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Version, will see that the word “homosexual” does not appear in the Bible—as one would expect, since sexual orientation is a modern concept.

Letha Scanzoni notes, we cannot know God’s will by simply isolating out-of-context verses. Better, she says, to apply basic biblical principles, such as loving our neighbor as ourselves; not judging; and obeying Micah 6:8, where we are instructed to do justice, love compassion, and walk with God in humility. “For Christians,” [the minister and peace activist] William Sloan Coffin Jr. has written, “the problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that condemn it, but how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ.”

S&S: How have Christian opponents of gay marriage responded to your interpretation of these key passages?

DM: In addition to many supportive communications, I’ve received a few dozen letters and e-mails from opponents who are disappointed or even outraged that we would take this stand. With one exception, none of these folks appear to have actually read our short book. Most feel we are violating the plain-sense reading of those seven biblical texts that seem to condemn same-sex contact. They write to me to share their convictions and feelings and the basis for them, and that’s an appropriate response. I credit them with fair play.

S&S: Gay marriage has been legal in Massachusetts for almost two years now. Have any of the negative predictions made by its opponents come true?

DM: All indications so far are that the institution of marriage is doing just fine, or at least no worse, in Massachusetts since the advent of gay marriage. The heterosexual marriage rate has not fallen off, and public and legislative support for gay marriage has actually increased. That’s actually no surprise because public attitudes often follow social policy, as evidenced when white racial attitudes became more favorable following school desegregation and the U.S. Civil Rights Act.

S&S: Most societies have had some form of marriage, and many societies have had taboos, religious or social, against the dissolving of marriages. The need to bond is an intrinsic human need, yet in many ways,
it seems our society encourages people to serve themselves rather than try to forge or strengthen bonds.

DM: Social psychologists are now talking about and researching the human need to belong, or what Letha Scanzoni and I call “the longing for belonging.” We are social animals who flourish, who live with greater health and happiness, when supported by close, committed relationships. The radical individualism of modern America entails benefits, but at a cost. People in competitive, individualistic cultures have more personal freedom, take more pride in personal achievements, are less geographically bound to their families, and enjoy more privacy. Their less unified cultures offer a smorgasbord of lifestyles and invite individuals to construct their own identities. These cultures also celebrate innovation and creativity, and they tend to respect individual human rights. When individualists pursue their own ends and all goes well, life can seem rewarding.

Curiously, though, within individualist cultures, people with the strongest social ties express the greatest satisfaction with their lives. Moreover, the seeming benefits of individualism can come at the cost of more loneliness, more divorce, more homicide, and more stress-related disease. Individualists also demand more romance and personal fulfillment in marriage, which subjects the marriage relationship to more pressure.

S&S: In *The American Paradox*, which came out in 2000, you wrote that despite rising affluence in the United States since 1960, many things have worsened for society as a whole. If you were writing the book today, would anything in it be different? Have any of the trends you wrote about changed trajectory?

DM: Teen suicide, teen violence, and teen pregnancy have all, thankfully, abated somewhat since their early 1990s peak. But as [social psychologist] Jean Twenge documents in her forthcoming book, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, younger Americans are still plagued with epidemic narcissism, illusory optimism, and all-too-common anxiety and depression. My hope is that books such as this are a harbinger of a cultural pendulum shift away from the extreme economic and social individualism of our recent past and toward a future that balances “me” and “we,” a future that affirms both individual rights and communal well-being.

S&S: What is the next topic in psychology that you want to communicate to a wide audience?

DM: I’m currently finishing the new editions of my textbooks, *Psychology* and *Social Psychology*. Beyond that, I’ll deal with the future when it comes.