

# **FLOURISHING LOVE**

## A Secular Guide to Lasting Intimate Relationships

*Enrico Gnaulati*



# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
About the author	xi
Introduction	xiii
<i>CHAPTER 1</i>	
Aspiring to flourishing love	1
<i>CHAPTER 2</i>	
Surviving domesticity	23
<i>CHAPTER 3</i>	
Doing conflict well	53
<i>CHAPTER 4</i>	
Humor me	77
<i>CHAPTER 5</i>	
Lust is a must	97

*CHAPTER 6*

Wrangling with roving desires 123

*CHAPTER 7*

Getting the right sort of help 151

Notes 185

Index 215

# Acknowledgments

The title and central themes of this book have undergone several iterations. From the outset, I wanted to write a book that was an affirmation of marriage, or long-term intimate partnership. I envisaged my readership to comprise spouses on the brink of ending their relationships who needed a reality check concerning realistic notions of the natural and expectable ups and downs, phase of life challenges, and romantic disillusionment all couples face, to avoid misconstruing unavoidable erosions in closeness as a sign of dire incompatibility. The book retained this focus but took on a higher purpose: a counter voice to the religious-moral cynics among us who steadfastly believe that ordinary human love is a feeble motivational source to inspire and re-inspire long-term romantic loyalty and commitment. In essence, while knee deep in writing the book over the past three years, I realized there is a great need for a pro-marriage, long-term intimate partnership void of religious-moral baggage that hitches itself to secular humanistic values.

I wish I could say I dialogued with flesh-and-blood psychologists and philosophers to cobble together my secular humanistic positions on love and marriage. However, being the introverted, bookish person

I am, my shifting ideas were chiefly the product of deep engagement with texts. Among the key authors I credit with influencing my thinking are: Aaron Ben-Ze'ev; Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy; Alain de Botton; William J. Doherty; Martin Hagglund; Herant Katchadourian; Robert Karen; Aaron Lazare; Harriet Lerner; Esther Perel; Mari Ruti; and Deborah Tannen.

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## About the author

**Enrico Gnaulati**, PhD, is a clinical psychologist based in Pasadena, California, and Affiliate Professor of Psychology at Seattle University. He has published numerous journal and magazine articles and his work has been featured on Spectrum News, Al Jazeera America, China Global Television Network, KPCC Los Angeles, KPFK Los Angeles, KPBS San Diego, WBUR Boston, KPFA Berkeley, Wisconsin Public Radio, Public Radio Tulsa, and online at *The Atlantic*, *Salon*, and *Psychology Today*, as well as reviewed in *Maclean's*, *Pacific Standard*, the *Huffington Post*, *The Australian*, *Prevention*, and the *New Yorker*. He is a blogger for *Mad in America*, an internationally recognized reformer of mental health practice and policy, and the author of *Back to Normal: Why Ordinary Childhood Behavior is Mistaken for ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, and Autism Spectrum Disorder* (Beacon Press, 2013); *Saving Talk Therapy: How Health Insurers, Big Pharma, and Slanted Science are Ruining Good Mental Health Care* (Beacon Press, 2018); and *Emotion-Regulating Play Therapy with ADHD Children: Staying with Playing* (Jason Aronson, 2008). His latest book is *Peacemaking with Preschoolers: Conflict Resolution to Promote Emotional Mastery and Harmonious Classrooms* (Good Media Press, 2023).

## Introduction

If you picked up this book because you're one of the growing mass of people who are cynical about what marriage, or a marriage-like commitment, can deliver in the way of life fulfillment, being of the opinion it demands too much self-denial, dignifies domestic drudgery, and can sandbag an erotic life—but you're open to being persuaded otherwise—read on.

Maybe you're among the roughly half of those in the United Kingdom or one-third of Americans who now self-identify as “religiously unaffiliated.”<sup>1</sup> Because of the historic link between marriage and religion, as someone who has stepped back from churchgoing, you believe a host of conjugal ideals are old-fashioned, out of step with the realities of modern love. For instance, you may be of the mindset that just because you're going steady with someone doesn't lockstep you into a future marriage proposal. You certainly don't see marriage as an avenue to kick off and legitimize an active sex life. It's likely the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* in the US troubled you greatly because you wouldn't want the fear of an unwanted pregnancy—due to limits on your access to emergency contraception or abortion—to hamper your

right to explore your sexuality as freely and openly as possible. Nor would you want any restrictions on your reproductive choices to lead you to keep an accidental pregnancy and feel obligated to marry someone you only feel so-so about.

In your eyes, marriage is not a ticket that needs to be punched to consider yourself a mature adult. Perhaps you have taken, or want to take, the scenic route to adulthood. Steering clear of any premature marriage commitment has allowed you greater freedom to run with and through friendships, travel, fall in and out of love, gain sexual experience, get to properly acquaint yourself with your personal likes and dislikes. Being ready for a serious long-term commitment means seeing your educational goals in the rear-view mirror and your early career plans already materializing.

For all you know, you're in a good-enough relationship where all the signals say it could get even better if you really settle in—pledge to be the most emotionally vulnerable, fair-minded, reliable, sincere, affectionate version of yourself. But somehow you keep conflating *settling in* with *settling*, holding back from fully investing in the love you have, and holding out for some yet-to-be-discovered love that will satisfy you in every way.

When eventually entertaining a marriage commitment, you wonder whether the whole idea of taking a solemn oath “before God, till death do us part” just sets couples up to stop trying—when you're morally bound to be forever loyal, where's the motivation to keep rendering yourself interesting, kind, sexy, and lovable in your own eyes and in those of your mate? When we vow to love someone forever, aren't we making the shaky assumption that love is within our conscious control and a marital commitment made at one point in time is sufficient to override all that life throws at partners as life progresses?

One thing you know for sure you don't subscribe to is any biblical, or divinely inspired, justification for female submission and male dominance in a heterosexual marriage, and women being valorized as child bearers and rearers, confined to the domestic sphere. Being in an egalitarian relationship with equal power sharing is probably what's sacrosanct to you. So too is the credo that in a good marriage or intimate partnership, a person's better self can get bigger, and that there's always a dynamic interplay between maximizing your own personal happiness



measured against making your significant other happy. In all likelihood, the Judeo-Christian virtue of surrendering personal happiness to cement a marital bond doesn't sit well with you.

And, if you are a member of the LGBTQ community, the moral-religious baggage surrounding traditional marriage, doubtless, has left you looking for ways to customize your wedlock plans. Although in the US gay marriage is legal in all fifty states and almost 60 percent of same-sex adult couples are married,<sup>2</sup> data shows that lesbians, gays, and bisexuals who want to affiliate with a church often find themselves in a bait and switch situation: they are welcomed, so long as they stay on the downlow about their sex lives or aspire to celibacy and see themselves as sinners in need of repentance.<sup>3</sup> Popular Catholic theologian, Scott Hahn, has some grim words for gays and lesbians looking for the social approval marriage can confer: "any society in which the idea of same-sex 'marriage' can gain a foothold has already lost its marriage culture."<sup>4</sup> This is no oddity. The conservative-leaning Supreme Court is poised to undo laws that guarantee legal rights to same-sex consensual sexual practices and same-sex marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Even though most of the Western world is becoming increasingly secular, in matters related to marriage and family we are still marinating in Judeo-Christian norms as to rightminded ways to conduct ourselves, which is a turn-off for large swathes of people contemplating tying the knot. Currently, it's estimated that a mere 37 percent of Americans believe society benefits when people prioritize marriage and childrearing.<sup>6</sup> If a resurgence of hope and optimism around the advantages of marriage and family life is to occur, we need a cultural infusion of secular humanistic values for people to access, informing them on how to hold themselves and each other accountable for the betterment of their romantic union. An awareness that their conscience is not a hot box of divine surveillance, but an inner voice reminding us of the ways we need to do right by ourselves and others. A healthy habit of dialing into the innate human capacity for benevolence, compassion, and fairness, without any divine intermediary. A reliance on worldly, not otherworldly, ethical wisdom. Acceptance of the axiom that the love you get is always influenced to some degree by the love you offer. That ultimately, loyalty and commitment are anchored to and sustained by the balancing out of benefits received and burdens suffered over time in

an intimate partnership, not some expression of moral-religious duty to abide by a sacred vow sworn on one's wedding day.

These are heady topics, but they can be unpacked in graspable and humorous ways, where the reader walks away supplied with usable knowledge to apply in his or her relationship—which this book strives to do. I will draw from the latest science, ancient and recent philosophical wisdom, stories, and psychological insights from my psychotherapy practice with couples, what real life partners in long-term happy marriages and intimate unions have to say, musings from my own thirty-year marriage, and even what can be learned from comedians and cartoonists—secular sources of knowledge—to map out what flourishing intimate relationships look like and how best to maintain them.

Starting out, I address what it means to embark on a path to flourishing love based on a joint personal desire and commitment to co-invest in treating each other lovingly—a *mutual happiness project*. I bring to life some of the non-negotiables, like deeply felt acceptance of the emotional upkeep involved—the wholesomeness of something as seemingly basic as showing genuine interest in what a partner thinks, feels, says, and does—and an ongoing openness to manifest love with physical affection. I challenge notions of Christian agape love that espouse joint self-sacrifice, claiming such a roadmap may lead to satisfactory romantic unions, less so flourishing ones. Self-interest cannot be whitewashed out without compromising the quality of love given and gotten. Nor can self-interest lead to us ignoring our human obligation to meet our beloved's happiness needs. Flourishing love is neither selfless nor selfish. The reader will discover that knowing your own and your significant other's likes and dislikes, creating emotional space together for them to be nonjudgmentally talked about, is the very definition of mutual respect.

Other ideas I descriptively tackle include how to employ a fairness habit of mind around household chores, childrearing responsibilities, finances, and even what transpires to ensure that a couple gets a good night's sleep. I argue that the religious romanticization of parenthood and family life obscures the fact that during the long arc of a marriage, the phase consisting of running a household and raising children is incredibly demanding. Realistically speaking, even the sturdiest couples do best

surviving, not thriving, during these tumultuous years. That said, being a good parenting team can afford a couple a joint sense of mission that bonds them to offset the inevitable estrangement that creeps in. Later in life, the parenting payoff, witnessing your grown children act with good character and function like citizens of the world, is deeply rewarding.

As we shall see, it's a myth that a happy marriage is a conflict-free one. Science reveals that the disputes couples get into early in a relationship have an indefinite shelf life. A more realistic goal for couples is not to eliminate conflict but to improve relational management of it. Repair and reconciliation though humbling oneself and offering a guilty apology, creating inroads for forgiveness, is the relational know-how of happy couples. My secular approach to respectful communication and conflict resolution taps what I call "conversational ethics," or the how-to of conversing well and doing conflict better. I introduce the reader to the difference between "talking at" and "talking with"; how to honestly, yet tactfully, speak up; and the crucial step of communicating acknowledgment of someone's point of view during heated exchanges to de-escalate things. These are just some of the skills that need to be mastered if couples are to become adept at moving from prideful monologuing to humble dialoguing. I also shine a light on how couples can avoid unnecessary conflict by better appreciating characteristic masculine and feminine ways of speaking and listening.

My favorite chapter to write, and the one I'm tempted to have the reader jump ahead to, is "Humor me" (Chapter 4). Humor, irony, and an appreciation for the absurd are largely overlooked by marriage scholars as mindsets conducive to success at love—perhaps seen as too trivial a topic worthy of scientific investigation—yet such mindsets may constitute one of the most potent ways romantic partners can best adapt to and accept all the contradictions and obstacles baked into contemporary romantic unions. It augers well when couples use humor to channel friendly intent, deflect insults, confess personal shortcomings in good-natured ways, and preserve positivity during disagreements. By using pet names, terms of endearment, and private jokes, couples lubricate their close attachment. As happy couples age and they reconcile themselves to the fact that their years together are numbered, snickering replaces bickering. I assert that deft use of wit to minimize emotional harm and maximize enjoyment in a relationship is a human virtue.

I pull no punches elevating the importance of a vital sex life for flourishing love to form and last. The over-moralizing of sex by organized religion hinders full cultural acceptance of sex-positive attitudes that promise to breathe new life into erotically compromised intimate relationships. Within most religious contexts, the sexual preferences of gay and lesbian couples are negated. Yet information about the sexual turn-ons of those in the LGBTQ community can be good to include in the sexual playbook of heterosexuals. We are at an inflection point in our culture where the debate needs to shift from sex negativity to sex positivity to support marriages and long-term intimate partnerships that are at risk of dissolving. I walk the reader through how measuring women's libido in quasi-internal-combustion-engine ways, as an energy level, fueled by sexual fantasy, is problematic. Many couples' sex lives flounder due to under-appreciating the expectable effects of divergent gendered turn-ons and -offs. The "missionary position" is really the "missing it position" as far as women's orgasmic pleasure is concerned. The transition to parenthood, as well as the drudgery of domestic life, can flatline a couple's sex life.

I assert that as the years go by, if a vital sex life is to be preserved, each member of the couple must steadily accept that erotic feelings don't always spring up on their own. Carving out time and setting the mood for sex to happen may feel like a poor substitute for the spontaneous sexcapades of yesteryear, yet it can be surprisingly erotically satisfying. Mediocre sex is often the outgrowth of men being too sexually self-absorbed and women being insufficiently sexually self-absorbed. The prickliness of people, where they get too jumpy if their comfort preferences are not met, poses special challenges for couples' sex lives.

Another myth I dismantle involves the notion that once a person "ties the knot" and enters a marital commitment, amorous feelings for anyone other than their beloved fade away. Even in robust marriages, crushes on others are remarkably common, best friends of a spouse lusted after, and "back burner" lovers actively fantasized about as possible fallbacks in case an established relationship gets dismantled. These roving desires do not necessarily suggest a person is attachment phobic or is falling out of love. There's also keener cultural interest surrounding the idea that monogamy subverts people's needs for sexual variety and novelty and that for partners who desire something kinkier than their

mate allows, alternatives outside the relationship need not be forbidden outright. Sometimes the answer is to courageously push the boundaries of the drab sex life they have fallen into and add some kink to their otherwise vanilla sex lives—*kinky vanilla sex*.

If committed love is to endure, it's imperative we find a way to neither automatically condone nor condemn wayward expressions of intimacy needs and sexual enticements. Mutual consent to open up a marriage/long-term partnership, with transparency and honest communication about sexual preferences and jealous feelings, is considered the high-water mark of ethicality. But ethics come into play also when nonconsensual affairs are conducted. As morally bankrupt, or slippery a slope, as it sounds, not all forms of betrayal are equal and perhaps it's possible to talk of "loving deception," or conducting an affair with secrecy and discretion, so as to emotionally safeguard a primary partner and minimize threats to a good marriage. Affairs are not always the death knell of a marriage/long-term partnership. The case of Peter is presented to illuminate pivotal steps that can be taken in therapy to best handle the emotional fallout from affairs in ways that make constructive use of anger and guilt, as well as tap opportunities for contrition and forgiveness.

The final chapter of the book should be an informative resource for both struggling couples and mental health professionals. It sketches out what might occur behind closed doors in the therapy office to give distressed couples their best shot at recovering and thriving. The stubborn myth exists that couples therapy is where troubled marriages go to die. That may be due, in part, to the standard "neutral" approach adopted by the average therapist which is *autonomy affirming*—helping clients clarify the issues and prioritize each other's personal happiness. Arguably, therapists have a competing ethical duty to be *marriage affirming*—to advise beleaguered couples to postpone any decision around separating until therapy is given a real chance. If troubled marriages or intimate partnerships are to survive and thrive—or end with optimal damage control—they are best treated by a skilled therapist, not just a competent one.

Finally, clients often draw motivational inspiration to be more attentive and loving in their primary relationships from existential themes—what ultimately matters in life is committing to being the best loving

version of yourself to fortify important relationships and realizing therapy is an avenue to breaking intergenerational patterns of dysfunctional relationships, thereby gifting children with better prospects in their future romantic journeys. Evocative snippets from actual couples therapy sessions I have conducted are described to pull the reader in. Of course, I changed names and altered factual information for confidentiality reasons. But essential issues, meanings, and outcomes have been preserved. At no time do I source purely fictional accounts.

Dotted throughout the book are references to the secular idea that mortality awareness and death acceptance are motivators to push romantic partners to enact their most loving versions of themselves with each other. Befriending death as the end point of our life, and that of our beloved—not as a portal to eternity—can create that all-important sense of urgency to be a more involved, considerate, appreciative, forgiving partner. The background sense that time is slipping away and death can come out of nowhere is not a morbid preoccupation, but an ethical wake-up call. It goads us to not just live and love well now, but live and love better now. None of us want deathbed regrets—a nagging sense that we stupidly held grudges, let petty grievances fester, had our relationship priorities all whacky. Death acceptance makes us chase the deep consolation associated with knowing that when that dreaded, but inescapable, day arrives we can draw solace from the fact that we strove to love at our best, with our beloved feeling he or she was truly loved. Dying with an awareness that one has loved well and been loved well in return takes the sting out of death. I'm hoping that for this generation which has lived under the dark shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, the death anxiety that has surfaced can be seized upon as a motivator to pursue more fulfilling love relationships.

At its core, this book is a pro-marriage, pro-long-term intimate partnership guidebook for those who trend secular in their value system. Who are not apt to rely on divine inspiration, sacred texts, religious leaders, church communities, or prayer to govern their love lives. Who put their faith in the human potential to call upon a combination of psychological resources, scientific information, common sense, raw intelligence, and innate ethical sensibilities to live life and to love as fully as possible. (A quick note: although it's cumbersome, I try to use terms like marriage, intimate partnership, and romantic union, as well as spouse,

partner, and significant other, interchangeably, to be inclusive of all the committed relationship types that different-sex and same-sex couples enter into.) Pro-marriage books are almost always the exclusive purview of organized religion, as if secularists have nothing authoritative to say on matters related to vital marriages and family values. This book aims to correct that.

More people than ever are asking themselves questions such as: Why marry, or enter into a marriage-like commitment? Why stay married? Why remarry? What makes love last? Can it last? If so, are there unique rewards it offers that make life worth living? These are secular questions for secular times. Occasionally, the media rolls out the health benefits of marriage—fewer strokes and heart attacks, higher cancer survivor rates, better post-surgical recovery outcomes, lower likelihood of depression, living longer.<sup>7</sup> Truth be told, it's those that are fortunate enough to be in *vital marriages* that get the health and longevity bumps.

In the first study of its kind using a large representative sample of US adults to investigate health and longevity outcomes related to marital status and quality, those that said they were “very happily” married were twice as likely to report better health than those indicating they were “not too happily” married. The latter were almost 40 percent more likely to have shorter lives.<sup>8</sup> Other findings show that those who consider their spouse or partner to be their best friend obtain about twice as much additional emotional satisfaction from marriage or long-term partnering than those who don't classify their significant other that way.<sup>9</sup>

The takeaway is that it's not a lasting marriage or partnership per se that can potentially keep us alive longer and up the chances of enhancing couples' emotional and physical well-being, it's the *quality* and *depth* of their relationship that matters. It's their know-how in showing and receiving flourishing love. This book aims to make such a life-affirming endeavor tangible and realizable. If in its pages you find that to be true for you, setting you on a quest, the countless hours I have spent poring over relevant research, ferreting out the wise offerings of dubious bedfellows like philosophers and comedians, reflecting on my therapy work with couples, and taking solo writing trips on retreat in the desert at Joshua Tree and mountains in Idyllwild, California, will have been well worth it.

## CHAPTER 1

# Aspiring to flourishing love

One of the unsung heroes of the twentieth century who paved the way for marriage being considered a form of intimate friendship was a hard-driving California judge by the name of Ben B. Lindsey. In 1927, he co-authored a book titled *Companionate Marriage*,<sup>1</sup> in which he laid out arguments that for most people today seem yawningly reasonable, yet in those days raised more than eyebrows. He proposed that young men and women ought to be able to enter into a trial marriage for a year-long period to see if they were truly compatible. During this probationary love-test, couples were encouraged to use birth control to prevent pregnancy and parenthood before their marital bond was viable. That way, they could get to know each other with clothes on, and clothes off, not just while they were on their best behavior to ensure the clothes came off.

Once the year was up, if the couple had wind in their sails and believed they were well-matched, they could convert their provisional marriage into a more permanent arrangement. If, on the other hand, they believed they were ill-suited, they could fast-track a divorce and go their separate ways.



The good Judge Lindsey would wholeheartedly agree with the nugget penned by his clever contemporary, Mark Twain: “Love heightens all the senses except the common.”<sup>2</sup> He accepted the notion that the forces bringing lovers together can be very different than what keeps them together. The motivation to be together during the romantic phase of a relationship goes without saying: wanting to bask in the erotic excitement and mutual adoration lovers offer each other. Getting lost in each other’s eyes, the giddy laughter, the enchanting smiles, the engrossing conversations, the electrifying sensuality—all fueling a dream-like state of lovers feeling they were made for each other, a perfect fit. The romantic intensity is destined to wear off, even though lovers in love are convinced it will be everlasting. They are blind to such buzz-kill axioms served up by philosophers on matters relating to how the intensity of romantic love fades over time: “First there is the thrill, then there is the coping”<sup>3</sup> and “Love is skill rather than enthusiasm.”<sup>4</sup>

For the fortunate, if the initial romance is to blossom into a deeper, more settled form of lasting intimate companionship, the high-octane *motivation to be together* has to involve some *commitment to stay together* based on a couple’s realistic view of who each of them are as persons and how lovingly they are capable of treating each other. Although he did not use the term explicitly, Judge Lindsey was a forerunner of the belief that healthy marriages were best established based on *personal commitment*.<sup>5</sup> This term, put forth by veteran sociologist Michael Johnson, is at the heart of what makes companionate marriages/partnerships—and ultimately flourishing love—survive and thrive. Partners’ attraction to each other and the quality-of-life benefits of the relationship—when mutually kept up—sustain a personal commitment to stay together. Couples who are personally committed treasure the emotional bond they have and stay involved largely because they *want to*.

On the other hand, a *moral commitment* to a marriage is rooted in the notion that spouses stay together out of a sense of *duty rather than desire*. Romance may make courting partners desire to be together, but once marriage is entered into, spouses have a moral obligation to remain together, typically based on the conjugal vows they declared in the eyes of God and religious authorities. Their commitment is to the marriage vows they took, and marriage as a divinely inspired covenant, as distinct from a commitment to make each other happy and the