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**ARRANGED MARRIAGES, WORTH TAKING
A SECOND LOOK**

What would you include among the most serious problems facing American families today? Certainly there are many, from drug abuse to spouse abuse to child abuse. All of these societal ills are accompanied (and perhaps exacerbated) by the highest divorce rate in the history of the world. The institution of marriage is one of the essential identifying elements of any culture. Marriage throughout history has involved time-honored traditions. In most cultures, the day of one's marriage is certainly one of the most important days in an entire lifetime.

Since it is obvious that the choice of a life mate will have a drastic impact on a person's life, in most cultures throughout history, great care has been given to the process of mate selection. Indeed, in a majority of country's, marriages arranged by families or matchmakers serving at the behest of families has been the norm.

However, in the United States and most English speaking countries, "love marriages" as distinguished from "arranged marriages" have been the norm. In a love marriage, a man and woman meet by happenstance "or blind luck" without any input from their families, fall in love, marry and live happily ever after; or do they?

According to the National Center for Health Statistics and the US Census Bureau, the divorce rate per 1000 population in the United States in 1997 was 4.3. That was down from a divorce rate of 5.2 per 1000 population in 1980, but up from a divorce rate of 2.2 per 1000 population in 1960. The likelihood of a new marriage ending in divorce as of 1988 was 43%. In other words, 43 new marriages out of every 100 likely will end in divorce based on 1988 statistics. This compares to a divorce rate per 1000 population in Japan of .62 per 1000 population, a rate that is less than 15% of the US rate. The second highest divorce rate is in the United Kingdom, a rate of 3.8 per 1000 population which is lower than the United States but more than six (6) times higher than Japan. What is the difference between the Asian culture in Japan and the English speaking culture in the U.S. and United Kingdom? Certainly there are many differences but one which stands out is the fact that arranged marriages prevail in Asia whereas love marriages prevail in English speaking countries.

It goes without saying that a high divorce rate is a very bad thing for society. It tears families apart, leads to life long stresses and strains, exacerbates alcohol and drug abuse problems, is hard on children, hard on grandparents, hard on everybody. A recent study showed that among the stressful events in a person's life divorce rates second only behind death of a spouse as the most stressful event a person ever has to deal with. To put this in perspective, on a scale of 100 with death of a spouse ranking 100,

divorce ranked a 73, a jail term ranked 63, and getting fired at work ranked 47.

There can be little doubt that our society is permeated these days with the problem of divorce and the effect divorce has on people's lives. Would you have believed 30 years ago that in the year 2000, there would be two popular network television shows entitled "Family Law" and "Judging Amy" about divorce court? Indeed, the fact that it has been necessary for the Kentucky Legislature to create a special Family Court judgeship in Christian County at a cost of more than \$300,000 a year is proof of the divorce problem which has gotten so bad that it has virtually overwhelmed the court system.

It behooves us as responsible members of American society to examine this problem which is clearly worse in the United States and other English speaking countries than in Asian and middle Eastern cultures which do not have the same high divorce rates and resulting family problems. Could it be that the willy-nilly, helter-skelter way we put couples together in "love marriages" is partially to blame? In a society dominated by scientists, engineers and mostly sober and serious minded people, we put no organized thought or planning into the way life mates are chosen for people. It is a hit or miss, luck of the draw, roll the dice type decision made mostly on the basis of hormonal urges and shallow short term characteristics such as appearance and whether a person is "cool." That's because in America,

families allow the kids to make the decisions about who their life mate will be and take no role in the process.

Responsible American citizens such as you and I have a laissez faire attitude about how life partners are chosen trusting cupid to see that matches are "made in heaven." We reject as unromantic, efforts by some to put logic and common sense into the process. For example, this recent column in the Kentucky New Era written by Cecil Herndon, an otherwise sensible man, criticizes Internet "inter-relationship" Web sites. Listen to these words by Mr. Herndon:

The Internet has changed the way people communicate, do business and entertain themselves. Now it's changing romance from "love at first sight" into an exchange of resumes.

Marriages once made in heaven are now being made on home computer screens, giving an entirely new meaning to the term, "marriage of convenience."

Cupid's bow is being replaced by shopping on line.

It has been said that there is someone for everyone in this world, and people no longer must search at random for their perfect someone. They can draw a profile of their dream someone, then shop accordingly.

We aren't sure what we think about all this, except that it sounds a lot like shopping for a new car. It may be a practical approach to finding a compatible companion, but love rarely is practical.

Love is a function of the heart, not the mind, and it certainly isn't the function of computer keyboard.

To hopeless romantics such as Cecil Herndon, I say you are wrong. Why not put a little common sense into the process? Why do we naively delude ourselves into thinking it is better to search at random for that perfect someone and sigh, oh, love is rarely practical?

Since I know that all Athenaeum members are broad minded enough to examine alternative lifestyles and cultures, let me review with you the marriage customs in some other countries. The parents of the bride and groom arrange marriages in most Muslim communities. A good marriage reflects well upon not just the couple but more significantly on the parents. If the marriage fails, then this reflects badly on the parents for arranging such a marriage. The possibility of marriage is initiated by the parents of the potential groom. There is very little involvement required from either the bride or the groom. Under traditional Muslim law, the groom can divorce the wife legally at any time simply by saying "I divorce thee" three times. The only excuse that the woman can use to initiate divorce is impotence on the man's part. Nonetheless, there are very few Muslim divorces when compared to American standards.

Hindu marriages are also mostly arranged. Very much like the Muslim tradition, the proposal takes place at a gathering of the family, and is directed to the family elders. This gathering is very important, in that it is used to determine the ~~capability~~^{compatibility} of the couple. The giving of a dowry has become a formality in modern marriages. It can include a number of things

or it could just be the engagement ring. (Footnote: D. Matschke, Vivaha, A Hindu Marriage.)

The traditional Chinese marriage is arranged through negotiation between the family members and a matchmaker. Some people are excluded from consideration, such as people with incurable diseases, people who have committed serious crimes and theatrical performers. Six (6) Chinese betrothal ceremonies are as follows:

1. The two families exchange documents containing the "eight (8) characters" of their son or daughter, which specify the hour, the day and year when the child was born.
2. The boy's father writes a formal marriage proposal letter to the girl's father. The matchmaker delivers the letter together with other cakes and gifts to the girl's family.
3. The girl's father writes back a letter accepting the proposal.
4. There is an exchange of gifts and a selection of wedding date.
5. At the family altar, the girl honors the gods and the spirits of her ancestors, serves tea and bows to her parents and elders.

In India, perhaps the country best known for arranged marriages, the custom is described by the following article written by an Indian woman and entitled, "First Comes Marriage, then Comes Love."

A suitable boy is first spotted by Bharati Narvani's uncle at a wedding in New Delhi, India. At that time, Bharati lived in Trinidad with her parents who

migrated some 25 years ago from India. The 21 year old university graduate was brought up with the customs and values of India. The boy, Manoj Solanki, 29, a civil engineer, is also of Indian parentage although born in Liberia and educated in England.

Bharati accompanies her parents to India on one of their regular visits. She knows that her parents are making this trip with the hope of finding a groom for her. She is amenable to the idea. Bharati was never allowed to date, or mingle freely with boys her age.

Once the Narvanis arrived in New Delhi, the uncle, the closest, senior male relative in India, arranges a meeting of the two families. Manoj is accompanied by his mother and aunt, Bharati, her mother and uncle. A discreet discussion takes place among the elders: Is Manoj able to support a wife? Can Bharati adapt to a foreign country? The Solankis make clear they do not expect a dowry. This is not uncommon in many modern arranged marriages. However, if the families were more traditional, the question of the dowry would be settled at this time.

Finally, the couple is given a chance to talk alone in another room. Manoj, being more confident, breaks the awkward silence with a joke. In between light bantering, the two manage to ask and answer serious questions about one another. Asking whether Bharati likes Indian movies, for instance, tells him how strong her cultural ties are. She wants to know whether Manoj expects her to be a housewife or will he be happy with her working? Will she live with his in-laws? His answers reassure her that they will live alone, that she is free to work, and that they can visit her parents whenever possible.

The attraction between the couple is immediate. Part of it has to do with the fact that this union will take place with the full consensus of their families - a very important consideration for Indian

men and women raised traditionally. Within 20 minutes, Manoj decides that Bharati is right for him. Bharati modestly tells her parents that she will accept their decision.

A month later, there is an elaborate engagement ceremony. Soon after, the wedding takes place ^{IN} and the couple's ancestral home of Baroda, Gujarat.

Bharati's mother misses her daughter tremendously but is satisfied that the arranged marriage was the best she could have done for her. "They may have lived worlds apart but they have everything in common: food, religion, language, culture and a similar outlook on life," said her mother.

The custom of arranged marriages in India has survived migration and modernization remaining central to the fabric of society. Although no exact figures are available, some 95% of all marriages in India are arranged. Many Indians contend that arranged marriages are more successful than marriages in the West, particularly given the latter's staggering divorce rates. Romantic love does not necessarily lead to a good marriage, and often fails once the passion dissipates they argue. Real love flows from a properly arranged union between two individuals.

From the Asian society's video letter from Japan entitled, "My Family", comes the following description of marriage customs in Japan.

In Japan, there are two types of marriages: the so-called love marriage and the arranged marriage. The modern system of arranged marriage is somewhat similar to blind dating in the United

States. When a young woman reaches marriageable age (now about 25 for a Japanese woman), she and her parents compile a packet of information about her, including a photograph of her in kimono and descriptions of her family background, education, hobbies, accomplishments and interests. Her parents then inquire among their friends and acquaintances to see if anyone knows a man who would be a suitable husband for her. The person who does becomes the go-between, showing the packet to the potential bridegroom, and if both parties are interested, arranging a meeting between them (The man provides a photograph and information as well). Such meetings often take place in the restaurant of a posh hotel. The go-between is present, usually along with representatives from both families. If the young couple feels inclined, they will begin dating, with marriage as a possible-but not inevitable-result. It is not uncommon for a woman to have 10 or more such introductions before she finds the man she wants to marry.

The young man and woman make the final decision about marriage between themselves, though they seek the advice and approval of their parents and their go-between. Some Japanese feel that romantic love is not the most important ingredient in a successful marriage. Perhaps this belief is borne out by the fact that divorce rate in Japan generally is lower than that in the United States. The divorce rate for arranged marriages in Japan is lower than for love marriages.

Finally, it is interesting to note that in Italy, commonly considered to be a country populated by romantics, according to tradition, many Italian marriages were arranged by the families of the bride and groom. Often, the brother or another male relative of the groom went to the father or uncle of the young woman to ask for her hand in marriage. In some cases, a matchmaker sent a message to the prospective bride's family of the man's

intent to marry the bride. Once the two families were in one accord, the couple's official engagement was announced. ("Italian wedding customs", Continuum Internet Publishing Services, Inc.)

So, what is the solution that we Atheneum members ought to suggest to our fellow Americans? Should we espouse the virtues of arranged marriages or should we continue our support of love marriages based on silly notions of love at first sight and cupid shooting his arrow? I would suggest to you that as unromantic as it may sound, there are definite benefits to society to be derived from the institution of arranged marriages. Love marriages, it can be argued, ignore the "real" things that make a marriage such as security, religion, educational status, common goals, family compatibility and compatibility of the individuals involved. In her article about arranged marriages in Bangladeshi, Natalie Zeman Davis wrote "Arranged marriages maintain the existing social order, affirm and strengthen parental relationships with children, keep family traditions and value systems intact, consolidate and extend family property, enhance the value of the kinship group and help young people avoid the stress and uncertainty of searching for a mate. On the other hand, she says love marriage disrupts family life and the kinship system, transfers a child's loyalty away from the family of birth to a single person, substitutes personal goals for the traditional family and kin-group obligations and leads people to exaggerate the quality of their loved one, leading to mistakes. She concludes, "kissing doesn't last, cooking does."

There is bound to be a way that we Americans could do a better job with the mate selection process. We could even make the process fun for young and old alike. What am I talking about? Why not divide communities into matchmaker teams? Wise and mature members of society such as Athenaeum members would lead these teams and they would get together on an annual basis for match-making/selection Saturday (similar to the NBA draft). Eligible bachelors and bachelorettes would submit their resumes in advance to the half dozen or so matchmaker teams in an existence in a city the size of Hopkinsville. The teams would then select eligible men and women for purposes of putting together ideal matches based on background, education, interests, goals, religions, family backgrounds and then bring the potential brides and grooms together for a huge introduction and party. If the matches took, great, if they didn't, well better luck next year.

The teams would measure their success over a period of years in terms of the number of marital partners who stayed in the marriage, the number of children produced, the number of merit scholars, etc. There would, of course, be a penalty for any divorces. There would be cash prizes to members of the matchmaking teams, thereby motivating responsible citizens to aspire to be a member of a matchmaking team, team members would be appointed by the Mayor subject to approval of the City Council of course. The County Judge Executive subject to the approval of Fiscal Court would appoint county members. In this way, everyone in the community

would have a role in the matchmaking process and it would contribute to the seriousness of the process.

Well enough of my example of how society might get more involved in the matchmaking process. Perhaps my example is ridiculous but I do have a point to make. Society as a whole would be better off if more American marriages would last a lifetime and our atrocious divorce rate diminished to the much lower levels experienced in other countries. One way this worthy goal could be achieved, in my opinion, would be if parents, families, community institutions and government would all take a more active and responsible role in the very important process of life-mate selection. Nothing could be more important to the survival of our culture than to have sound family structure, which is supportive of both young people and old alike. A laissez faire attitude and the feeling that matters of the heart are no one's business other than the young people involved are, in my opinion, a naive and unrealistic approach to an important aspect of our culture. The responsibility of assisting one's son or daughter in selecting an appropriate and compatible life-mate should be regarded as one of the single most important responsibilities of parenthood.

I am not suggesting that something so draconian as a quick switch to the more rigid policies followed in India. What I am suggesting is that a modified arranged marriage system such as used in Japan would be beneficial to our society. It would be the responsibility of parents to see that their son or daughter is introduced to appropriate potential mates who would

have the approval of the family. This process would go on until a match was achieved, thereby resulting in a use of the best aspects of both the arranged marriage and the love marriage methods of mate selection.

I will close with this bit of homespun wisdom: Courtship is like looking at the beautiful photos in a seed catalog. Marriage is what actually comes in your garden.