

Singled Out: The Lives of Single People
by Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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Perhaps you have heard the expression, “always a bridesmaid; never a bride”? I understand that there is a new movie coming out soon. It’s called “27 Dresses,” about a woman who has been a bridesmaid 27 times and has a closet filled with dresses (worn only once) to show for it. Speaking personally, I have never been a bridesmaid, nor have I ever been a bride, but for years I have been reflecting upon the institution of marriage and the reality of single life. It’s hard to know whether to put “single” in quotes or not, for being legally single is one thing and being “socially” single is another (after all, many legally single people indeed have close personal relationships; they are not, in fact, “single.”).

In any event, I began wrestling with this tangle of related issues in earnest as I began preparing for the ministry, given the high profile of “marriage equality” within the Unitarian Universalist movement. It feels like “wrestling” because ministers do not have the same scope of action that congregants have. Ministers have multiple roles, roles that sometimes conflict with each other, but the welfare of the congregation must be first and foremost. The trick is how to put the wellbeing of the congregation first, while still being an authentic human being who takes seriously the freedom of conscience that is part of our religious tradition. This wrestling has been enough to give me a few headaches, but over-the-counter pain relievers have gotten me through.

I invite you to laugh, chuckle, sigh, or cry at the following 10 myths about single people. The myths were collected by Bella DePaulo, a social psychologist and visiting professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Her new book is *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*. Here are the myths:

Myth #1 – Married people know best.

Myth #2 – You are interested in just one thing – getting coupled.

Myth #3 – You are miserable and lonely and your life is tragic.

Myth #4 – Like a child, you are self-centered and immature, and your time isn’t worth anything since you have nothing to do but play.

Myth #5 – Attention single women: Your work won’t love you back and your eggs will dry up. Also, you don’t get any, *and* you’re promiscuous.

Myth #6 – Attention single men: You are horny, slovenly, and irresponsible, and you are the scary criminals. Or, you are sexy, fastidious, frivolous, and gay.

Myth #7 – Attention single parents: Your kids are doomed.

Myth #8 – You don't have anyone, and you don't have a life.

Myth #9 – You will grow old alone, and you will die in a room by yourself where no one will find you for weeks.

Myth #10 – Let's give all of the perks, benefits, gifts, and cash to couples and call it family values. (Myth #10 is a reference to tax laws and employment policies which privilege married people over single people.)¹

DePaulo writes, “[In the mid 1950's in this country], when sex, parenting, and economic viability were all wound up together in the tight knot that was marriage, the difference between single life and married life was profound . . . marriage really was a transition to adulthood . . . Now, about half a century later, the institution of marriage remains ensconced in our laws, our politics, our religions, and our cultural imagination. But it is of little true significance as a meaningful life transition.”²

DePaulo notes, “Our cherished American notions about all people being created equal and deserving of the same basic civil rights and dignities – they apply mostly to married people. If you are single, your dead body is deemed less valuable. The eligible spouse of a married person receives a small amount of money from Social Security to cover funeral expenses. No such allowance is available for single people.” Now, tongue in cheek, “I suppose the reasoning is that since single people don't have anyone, their dead bodies can simply be tossed into a ditch by the first stranger who discovers them . . .”³

I chose this morning's topic for three primary reasons: *First*, the wellbeing of single people is a pastoral care issue: Americans now spend more of their adult years single than married. *Second*, the wellbeing of single people is a social justice issue: the ideology of marriage and family has not kept up with reality, and people are being harmed as a consequence. *Third*, it is hard to talk about potentially controversial topics even in a setting as religiously liberal as a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Practice makes *better*, if not perfect. This morning, I hope to model a respectful way of talking about a potentially controversial topic.

¹ *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and still Live Happily Ever After*, Bella DePaulo, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2006. The myths are chapter headings. See the table of contents.

² Page 11.

³ Page 6.

Here are a few numbers to provide context: By the year 2003 there were nearly 52 million Americans, ages eighteen on up, who had been single their entire lives. Nearly 22 million more were divorced, and 14 million more were widowed. Even without counting the nearly 5 million Americans who were separated in 2003, there were more than 87 million adults who were some sort of official single person, comprising more than 40 percent of all the adults in the country. “In the opening years of the twenty-first century,” according to DePaulo, “single people made up about 40 percent of the workforce, purchased more than 40 percent of all homes, and contributed about \$1.6 trillion to the economy”⁴

Yet despite the prevalence of (legally) single people, according to *Ms. Magazine*, the Bush administration institutionalized the “marriage-only” movement as policy. “On the premise that marriage is a ‘sacred institution,’ the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act allocated \$100 million a year for the next five years to encourage people – especially the poor – to marry and stay married. Over a billion dollars has been spent by the federal government on abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education programs since 2000.”⁵ This bothers me!

As Nicky Grist of the Alternatives to Marriage Project observes, “The framework of discussion about family and society has been so dominated by talk about marriage that it’s really been missing the fact that those conversations are not relevant to a lot of people, for a long time in their lives.”⁶ Corporate pay and benefits issues aside, Grist says that corporate time-off issues are also important. “There has been an important and valuable focus in the business world recently on creating family-friendly policies,” she says. “That’s great. But employers should be cautious to ensure that their family-friendly policies don’t become ‘single-hostile’ policies or marriage-exclusive policies. I would love to see employers take it one step further and become friendly to the personal realities of all their employees. So a single person who has made a commitment to care for an elderly neighbor once a week gets the same level of respect as a married employee who has made a commitment to coach their kids’ soccer team once a week. I think that’s the future of employee-friendly policies.”

In the book *Singled Out*, Bella DePaulo debunks the myths of being single. She says that much of what we in this culture have heard about the benefits of getting married and the disadvantages of staying single is exaggerated or incorrect. DePaulo calls discrimination against single people “the 21st century problem

⁴ Page 7.

⁵ “Happily Never Married” by Nadia Berenstein, *Ms. Magazine*, Summer 2007, p. 64.

⁶ Nicky Grist was quoted in “Single Adults No Longer Content with Fewer Benefits,” *Best Practices in Compensation & Benefits*, April 2007, Issue 728. The Alternatives to Married Project’s website is www.unmarried.org.

that has no name.” She names the problem “singlism” and says that “Singlism is an outgrowth of a largely uncontested set of beliefs, the Ideology of Marriage and Family. [The premises of the ideology] include the assumptions that the sexual partnership is the one truly important peer relationship and that people who have such partnerships are happier and more fulfilled than those who do not . . . [However,] people who are single – particular women who have always been single – fare better than the ideology would predict because they do have positive, enduring, and important interpersonal relationships.”⁷

Now, to get personal, there is enormous pressure on Unitarian Universalist clergy and laity to promote “marriage equality.” Next Sunday afternoon, for example, there will be a panel discussion at Neighborhood Church in Pasadena entitled “What Does the Bible Say about the Freedom to Marry?” Panelists span the interfaith spectrum, and the panel is sponsored by California Faith for Equality, the American Civil Liberties Union, Let California Ring (a group whose logo includes a gold wedding ring as the “o” in California), the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry, and five churches, including two Unitarian Universalist congregations.

This congregation will have opportunities to participate in events promoting “marriage equality.” It is appropriate for me to let you know that, while I will not be participating in such events, it would be wonderful if you want to do so. We – congregation and minister – may not always agree, and you may not always agree with each other, but we can and must talk with each other and listen to each other with respect. “Civil marriage is a civil right,” goes a popular Unitarian Universalist slogan. I respect those who say that, and, also, I disagree. Instead, I agree with a group called “Think Again.” They point out, “The question isn’t whether the state should marry queers, but whether the state should marry anyone. Marriage is the state’s instrument for regulating its version of morality and for granting economic benefits exclusively to couples.”⁸

So, am I against marriage? *As a social policy*, I am against having social benefits distributed based upon marital status. In that context, I am against discrimination based upon marital status. *As a choice made by members of this congregation*, I am glad to support that choice by officiating at a marriage ceremony or at a ceremony of union. While I do not believe in discriminating based on marital status, I also do not believe in throwing people to the wolves regarding their relationship lives and regarding the social safety net. We need more help, not less help, in learning relationship skills. We need a stronger social safety

⁷ Abstract for “Singles in Society and in Science” by Bella DePaulo and Wendy Morris, published in *Psychological Inquiry* (2005). See <http://depaulo.socialpsychology.org/>.

⁸ Undated postcard, which says, “THINK AGAIN are artists who strike back at mainstream ideas that perpetuate injustice. See <http://members.aol.com/agitart/>.

net, not one with even more rips and tears in it. Children thrive in stable, loving homes; stable, loving homes come in different forms. Rather than trying to support children indirectly through promoting marriage, we should support children directly through access to health care, affordable child care, and in many other ways.

The changing nature of family is not something to be feared; rather, it is something to be affirmed and celebrated. According to a group of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) activists and allies, “Marriage is not the only worthy form of family or relationship, and it should not be legally and economically privileged above all others. A majority of people – whatever their sexual and gender identities – do not live in traditional nuclear families.”⁹ Among those who stand to gain from alternative forms of household recognition are single-parent households, senior citizens living together and serving as each other’s caregivers, blended and extended families, children being raised in multiple households or by unmarried parents, adult children living with and caring for their parents, senior citizens who are the primary caregivers to their grandchildren or other relatives, and close friends or siblings living in non-conjugal relationships and serving as each other’s primary support and caregivers.

I try to put my money where my mouth is. Each month, I contribute money to four organizations automatically, through a charge to my credit card. One of the organizations is the Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry. Another one is the Alternatives to Marriage Project. “Whoa,” you might wonder. “Don’t they cancel each other out?” much like the votes of my mom and my dad, who used to joke after every election that their vote canceled each other’s vote out? No. These two organizations do not cancel each other out. The Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry works on other projects besides marriage equality, and the Alternatives to Marriage Project, in fact, supports marriage equality. However, the Alternatives to Marriage Project places marriage equality into a more comprehensive social justice context.

In a few moments, you will have an opportunity to respond to the theme of the service. [There was a time for “congregational response” after the sermon.] Inside and outside Unitarian Universalism, may we always speak truth in love. May we always speak truth to power. May we always speak truth with respect, and may we always listen with respect. May it be so!

⁹ “Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision,” see www.beyondmarriage.org.