

# Cohabitation doesn't doom marriages

BY ANNE REBAR  
Columnist

There is no question that relationship landscapes have changed drastically in the past few decades. Now more than ever, unmarried couples are living together before tying the knot.

Although this used to be frowned upon (the whole "why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?" business), and past research led us to believe divorce rates were drastically higher for those who lived together before they were wed, new findings suggest different.

A report released last month by the Center for Disease Control and the National Center for Health Statistics stated that, based on the National Survey of Family Growth, there is not a significant difference in divorce rates between couples who live together before exchanging vows and those who didn't.

Thirteen thousand men and women were surveyed, and of those who had been married for more than a decade, 60 percent of women and 62 percent of men had cohabited before marriage, and 61 percent of women and 63 percent of men had only cohabited with their current spouse. On the other hand, 66 percent of women and 69 percent of men

married for exactly 10 years never cohabited.

In a story from USA Today, sociologist Pamela Smock from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor said that, based on those numbers, premarital cohabitation has no negative effect on the future of a marriage. The 6 percent difference between couples who lived together and those who didn't is more likely linked to other factors than just the fact that they cohabited.

There are multiple Web sites set up by conservative groups dedicated to alerting the public to the "dangers" of living together before marriage, such as Mike McManus' Marriage Savers ministry. McManus' book "Living Together: Myths, Risks, & Answers," states that the mere act of living together increases a couple's risk of divorce by 50 percent. The book states it seeks to help couples find a more effective way to test their relation-

ship. It's full of "statistics and stories to illustrate the risks of cohabitation and the McManuses' proven answers," according to the press release on marriage-savers.org.

I really don't think having a piece of paper and a ceremony giving you the "go-ahead" to share an address (and — GASP — a bed) really makes that big of a difference. If it's right, the relationship will work out regardless.

Also, McManus implies that couples move in together to test their relationship before taking the next step toward marriage. However, national study of dating and cohabitation found that only 9 percent of men and 5 percent of women moved in to "test the relationship," according to an article in USA Today on reasons for cohabiting. Almost half of participants said that spending more time together was their reason for moving in.

What seems to be more of a

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factor are their intentions. Those who moved in after getting engaged, who intended to spend the rest of their lives together, had no difference in divorce likelihood at all. Those who just started living together with no communication about the future or ideas about where they would like the relationship to go had a higher risk of ending in divorce.

Questions like, "Does living together before marriage make divorce more likely?" are tricky to measure. You ideally would need to have couples that are exactly alike in all variables except cohabitation. However, that is obviously impossible because all couples are different. Thus, other variables, besides cohabitation, could be the cause of a marriage working or not working.

For example, those who choose not to live together before marriage might have religious views that frown upon that circumstance. Those with

this religious view also probably would be more against divorce. My bottom line is this: The 6 percent higher divorce rate for those living together before marriage suggests a correlation. However, it does not necessarily show causation.

With the housing markets and economy in the gutter, living together and sharing rent and bills rather than commuting back and forth and wasting time and gas is just smart. Obviously it's not something to jump into right away. Living together should be treated like the next stop on the route toward marriage (or, for those opposed to marriage, at least a life-long commitment).

If you're having doubts about the relationship's future, living together surely will not fix any problems. In fact, it will probably create more. But, if you're sure the person is "the one," and living together seems like the logical next step, a marriage license is not a necessity.



BY ELIZABETH NECKA  
Columnist

The names Rosie O'Donnell and Oprah Winfrey elicit a variety of responses. They are both famous, they both hosted talk shows and they both tried their hands at big-screen movies.

But now consider O'Donnell's desolation when Winfrey throws her into a well and locks her down there for days with only her Koosh balls for comfort: wacky, unrealistic and funny beyond belief. This was the scene last Friday night at the Tag Improv show.

As a member of Tag, it's my job to devise characters on the spot, work with my scene partner to heighten what is at stake in the story and somehow make a cohesive plotline. Oh yeah, and we should probably make the audience laugh if we want them to come back again next week. No pressure. Last week at our show, I began to wonder, what is the most effective scenario to evoke laughter and enjoyment from the audience? What is it that people find humorous?

## The Truman Experiment:

# Human psychology studies explores provoking laughter

A large difference between what is expected and the reality of a situation is one of the biggest provokers of laughter, according to leading researchers on humor psychology. For example, in a 1975 study in the *Journal of Psychology*, subjects were instructed to pick up what appeared to be the lighter of two weights, thereby making a prediction about the weight of each. They let out a smile or exclamation of laughter when the weight they picked up was notably heavier or lighter than they expected it to be. The comedic effect was larger when the difference between the expectation and the reality was larger, suggesting that the more the subjects were caught off-guard, the more entertained they were. This incongruity hypothesis occurs through a two-stage process, which explains why sometimes there's a delay in laughter as people take time to "get" a joke.

Maybe that explains the popularity of the "that's what she said" jokes. Statements that evoke the "that's what she

said" remark naturally are expected to be appropriate in everyday conversations. Taking them out of context for the joke disorients them from their original, intended and expected effect and makes us chuckle. In reference to ice cream (soft-serve or hard-serve), I prefer the hard kind. That's what she said.

Effective comedy activates areas of our brains that respond to emotions, meaning that funny things aren't just counter to our expectations. To interpret something as funny, we also have to be emotionally invested in it. Most people know the faces of O'Donnell and Winfrey and are likely to have some preconceived opinions about them. The joke at Tag would not have been nearly as funny if Mary McAleese (the President of Ireland) had locked up Jodi Picoult (author of "My Sister's Keeper"), for example, because those characters likely have little to no relationship with each other or to the audience. "I wish you were DNA helix so you could unzip my genes," only works

for those nerds who are invested enough in the material to understand the joke.

A classic rule of improvisation is that effective scenes build upon themselves, creating conflict, increasing tension and then immediately releasing it in an absurd way for a laugh. Take protesters at Capitol Hill who forgot their protest signs at home — conflict. What else can the protesters use as signage without their actual posters? They raid a local school for supplies, but find none. They use road kill to spell out their message, but it's too messy. Finally, they ask a passerby for a pen to write on their own bodies, but then get arrested for streaking. Professional improvisers in Chicago don't need a psychology degree to tell you that conflict creates laughter, and research supports their statement that laughter results from the release of anxiety.

Laughter releases endorphins, those chemicals also released after exercise that give you an overall good feeling. It lowers stress hormones and relaxes muscles, boosting immunity and increasing your lifespan. I know that I look forward to Tag shows on Fridays because we're a bunch of friends who are certain to make each other and hopefully our audience crack up. They're a relief during a stressful week, and apparently a great inspiration for a psych column as well.

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## MEDITATIONS OF MICHELLE: Feminine image associated with passivity

BY MICHELLE MARTIN  
Columnist

If you met a goddess-worshipper, would you see her (or him) as odd? I probably would look twice.

We tend to think of those who worship the feminine divine as pagan witches or New Age kooks who are ever-so-slightly off their rockers.

But as I reflect upon my upbringing in the Christian church, I missed the presence of strong females in the stories I heard on Sunday mornings. The Virgin Mary always seemed sweet, but she never had the sass or intrigue of Jesus, and she definitely didn't wrestle with any angels.

For hundreds of years, men and women in the Western world haven't had a healthy, independent female divinity to connect with, and perhaps have started to suffer for it. Athena, Aphrodite and Demeter used to rule alongside men, and historical evidence contends that Hera once was more widely worshipped than Zeus. But Western religion has become increasingly patriarchal as female associations subtly moved aside to make room for the heroic males conquering the pages of our holy texts.

Religions do more than provide us with a set of morals. They give us archetypes and role models. Author Tim Ward explored the loss of the divine feminine in his book, "Savage Breast." He quoted Carl Jung: "Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image ... an imprint or 'archetype' of all the ancestral experiences of the female." If he's right, consider what this means. Throughout school we absorb chosen relics of society's mythology, from "The Odyssey" to Noah's Ark to "Romeo and Juliet." If we passively soak up all these depictions of men and women, our definitions of gender roles are going to evolve accordingly.

For example, in "Savage Breast," Ward suggests that the utterly non-sexual purity of the Virgin Mary gives men and women an unrealistic ideal of purity. The Virgin Mary, from what I understand, is worshipped largely for obedience to her god, while God appears in fiery bushes and Jesus knocks over tables while yelling about society's wrongs. The Virgin Mary just stays put. I don't think purity and obedience are negative traits, but I wish the writers of our cultural mythol-

ogy had provided a few strong female figures to balance out her passive nature, like a warrior, prophet or priestess. (There are a few, but no one tells their stories in Sunday school.)

Some, like Ward, suggest many men idealize purity because of the Virgin Mary archetype. I recall a story I read in Russian literature class — a dashing man falls in love with a girl named Liza. He adores her innocent nature but as soon as he takes her virginity he loses interest in her and leaves her. She commits suicide. Sound vaguely familiar?

For all the reverence our largely Christian country pays to Mary, the very word "passive," a trait traditionally associated with the feminine, implies negativity and weakness in America. We don't take too kindly to vulnerability in our society, despite the fact that Jesus — our most prevalent religious figure — claimed in Matthew 5:5, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." To illustrate the dominance of the active over the passive, consider this: When was the last time you were making small talk and couldn't think of anything to say? Maybe your heart beat a tad faster as your mind raced for words. There's

a certain assumption in our society that if we don't fill every moment with speech — utilizing the active force — we are inept or weak. I always have wondered whether all humans similarly regarded conversational pauses as "awkward silence" or if Americans were especially antsy about it. Apparently, other cultures like the Maori of New Zealand revere silence within conversations. Long pauses signify reflection and appreciation of what was said rather than self-blame. Perhaps it is a pure coincidence that Maori worship includes both male and female deities, but I wonder if that diversity promotes an embrace of passivity — a "feminine" trait.

Passivity — associated with the yin, or the Taoist feminine energy — is an underutilized treasure in Western society. Sure, Americans work hard, we're efficient and we're productive. Those things are not exactly evil, because if no one worked to fulfill their dreams we wouldn't change a thing. But how would we know what to work toward if we never introspected? What's the use of efficiency if it costs us our gentleness and temper? When everybody wants to talk instead of listening, then what's the point of conversing? If you're all Yang — the male energy —



and no Yin, then you're all action but no substance. Most people consider the ideals of "surrendering" and "giving up" as negative values. But sometimes surrender helps you to lose your own agenda and simply experience the divine, which is basically the point of spirituality.

I do not, by any means, intend to subjugate women by reducing them to gendered descriptions like passivity. However, I realize almost every major world religion associates women with earth, darkness, passivity, receptiveness and nurturing. The male energy typically recalls the sky, activity and aggression. Thus, I object that our society represses a whole set of healthy traits because they are associated with femininity. Maybe once we broaden our religious archetypes to make room for the goddess again, we can let everyone share in the warmth of the "feminine" gentleness and passivity while offering women the cultural legroom to try on some new roles.