

Marriage Guide for the Quarter-Life Crisis

A review of



Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace With Marriage

by Elizabeth Gilbert

New York, NY: Viking, 2010. 285 pp. ISBN 978-0-670-02165-9. \$26.95



Reviewed by

[Ilene Serlin](#)

Disclaimer: I was sent this book to review. I was prepared to hate it, already had snarky comments made, and was embarrassed to be seen with it. I hadn't read *Eat, Pray, Love*, although I did drag my protesting spouse to see the film with Julia Roberts and confirmed it as the uber chick flick.

Disclaimer: Because my office is in the Marina District in San Francisco, everyone is 30-something. Protesting that I didn't really believe in developmental issues, I was nonetheless struck by the similarities across my clients' issues. They came in with panic attacks and depression, fueled by observations that all their friends were getting married, life was getting serious, they hated their work, and didn't know where to start searching for lives of meaning and purpose. So we started a group called "30-Something" that meets once a month to support, share, and process quarter-life crisis issues. The *New Yorker* review of *Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace With Marriage* was being sent around on e-mail, so when the offer came to review the book, I couldn't resist.

Fact: I couldn't put it down. I was entertained, and envious: envious that she got to write in this conversational, breezy style that included research, poignant family history and

insights, and a piercing intelligence and wit. What if all psychological writing could be in this accessible style? I was envious that she had the foresight and discipline to take daily notes of her journey, whereas I, along with many other baby boomers, was too busy living my geographic/psychological/spiritual/romantic journeys to take time to write. Ah . . . who would play me in my film? Maybe Meryl Streep?

Back to reality and the book review. Bottom line: I heartily recommend the book for any 20- to 40-something-year-old who is struggling with issues of commitment, love, intimacy, and marriage. And I heartily recommend it for therapists who want to understand and help those struggling with these issues. As well, I heartily recommend it for those who need reminders to laugh about the serious issues of life and the human condition.

I then began to imagine what it would look like if this book were structured as a course, something along the lines of Maimonides's "Guide for the Perplexed." Each chapter would serve as a section, as, for example:

1. Ambivalence. In this section, Gilbert acknowledges her own ambivalence about marriage and fear of being "caught." She knows that there is a "marriage benefit imbalance" in which marriage is not always healthy for women: They don't live longer, accumulate more wealth, or thrive in their careers, and they are more likely to get depressed or die a violent death than are single women.

Gilbert rightly dreads the real possibility of divorce, quoting Rebecca West's adage that "getting a divorce is nearly always as cheerful and useful an occupation as breaking very valuable china" (p. 4). According to the Holmes-Rahe stress scale, divorce is second only to the death of a spouse, and "even more anxiety-inducing than 'death of a close family member' (even the death of one's own child)" (p. 81). Once based on societal and institutional needs, divorce began skyrocketing by the mid-19th century as people exercised the right to choose their own partners.

2. Marriage Choices. However, the ability to choose without the wise counsel and perspective of family and community elders left young people often making poor choices. Eighteen-year-olds have a 75 percent divorce rate, whereas the divorce rate after age 50 is "statistically almost invisible" (p. 123). In this section, Gilbert reflects on her first marriage and "flighty" and "irresponsible" behavior. Only in time for her second marriage does she come to understand the importance of character, steadfastness, and honor.

3. Infatuation Versus Love. Exploring the universal human longing for passion, Gilbert considers Plato's story of Aristophanes' myth of wholeness in which we humans, originally whole but split in two, long for our other halves to feel whole again. This longing is expressed in loneliness, which causes us to be infatuated with the wrong person again and again.

Gilbert likens infatuation to an addiction in which "you're not really looking at that person; you're just captivated by your own reflection, intoxicated by a dream of completion that you have projected on a virtual stranger." Quoting Freud's definition of infatuation as "the overvaluation of the object" and psychologists' definition of the "state of deluded

madness” as “narcissistic love,” Gilbert admits, “I call it ‘my twenties’” (pp. 99–101). Fortunately, she has the wisdom to acknowledge that life is often enriched by irrational passion and that the depression that results from unmet desire can be a “friend” that brings us back to a more mature understanding of ourselves.

4. Cultural Perspectives on Marriage. By spending time and “interviewing” members of the Hmong tribe in Vietnam, Gilbert gains valuable perspective on the role of marriage among many cultures around the world. She comes to understand that “if you are a Hmong woman . . . you don’t necessarily expect your husband to be your best friend, your most intimate confidant, your emotional advisor, your intellectual equal, your comfort in times of sorrow” (p. 32).

She reviews useful facts about marriage throughout history, including the fact that marriage was not always “sacred,” even in Christianity, and was sometimes between a man and more than one woman or between two men (in ancient Rome), between two siblings (medieval Europe), between two children born or unborn (consolidating power between families), between a living woman and a dead man (China), or even a temporary 24-hour pass (Iran). Contrasting the Old Testament requirement for priests to marry with the early Christian repudiation of sexuality, the body, and marriage, Gilbert shows how the Christian ideal affected Western philosophy and morality. Then during the Middle Ages, marriage became a means of passing wealth down through the generations and a promise of security. Only in the 19th century did Queen Victoria establish the custom of a white gown and a traditional wedding. The notion of modern romantic marriage is indeed new!

Furthermore, when marriage was established to ensure the successful passage of wealth down generations, women lost many privileges. European courts upheld the idea of *coverture*, which maintained that a woman’s individual civil existence disappeared when she married. Once women established the ability to earn their own incomes, however, they no longer needed the support of marriage. By 2004, “unmarried women were the fastest-growing demographic in the United States,” and “a thirty-year-old American woman was three times more likely to be single than her counterpart in the 1970s” (p. 149).

Acknowledging the stresses that the Western ideal of the nuclear family places on modern marriages, Gilbert begins to realize that love is being there for each other and “there is not one special person who will make your life magically complete, but that there are any number of people (right in your community, probably) with whom you could seal a respectful bond” (p. 41). Marriage is not found but built: “The emotional place where a marriage begins is not nearly as important as the emotional place where a marriage finds itself toward the end, after many years of partnership” (p. 41).

5. The Myth of the Pursuit of Happiness. Acknowledging that she “had always been taught that the pursuit of happiness was my natural (even *national*) birthright,” Gilbert understands that the Western pursuit of individualism, romantic love, and happiness can create unrealistic expectations, crushing disappointments, insecurity, poor self-esteem, high

anxiety, depression, and confusion—all symptoms I see among the beautiful 30-something-year-olds in my office.

She calls the “life of individualistic yearning” the “birthright of my modernity,” creating almost “an entirely new strain of woman (*Homo limitlessness*)” who are in “danger of becoming paralyzed by indecision” or “compulsive comparers” in a modern world that “has become . . . a neurosis-generating machine of the highest order” (pp. 45–46).

6. Marriage Resilience and Tools. Gilbert summarizes other useful factors that help determine marriage resilience, such as education, history of cohabitation, heterogamy, social integration into a community, religiousness, and gender fairness. She looks at the importance of loving boundaries to establish trust and reduce risks of affairs, of ceremony and ritual, and of being thoughtful and taking control of the relationship.

She covers topics that include fidelity, money, prenuptial agreements, having children, transparency, and accepting each other’s flaws, and she concludes with a view of mature marriage as a spiritual path: “Perhaps transcendence can be found not only on solitary mountaintops or in monastic settings, but also at your own kitchen table, in the daily acceptance of your partner’s most tiresome, irritating faults” (p. 131).

In sum, the journey that Gilbert takes to understand the institution of marriage prepares not only her, but also her readers, to step toward greater wisdom and mature love.