
The Masculinist #20 - The New Memetic Moment

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Welcome back the Masculinist, the monthly newsletter about the intersection of Christianity and masculinity.

Are you someone who is concerned about men in America and the church? Is the Masculinist stimulating your thinking? If so, please forward it to Christian men you know who might be interested, because I need your help to spread the word. The percentage of subscribers who read my emails is off the charts high, and the list has been growing steadily as people like you pass it along. So thanks a lot and please keep sharing.

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Connecting With You

If you are in New York City and I don't already know you, please email me at arenn@urbanophile.com, because I want to connect in person if we can. Thanks to those who reached out to me last month. I was able to meet up with some readers, which was great.

Welcome to the Meme World

Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. In Dawkins formulation, a meme was the idea analogue of a gene. In these sense of the word, the dictionary now defines a meme as "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture."

Today, the word meme is more likely to refer to those (supposedly) funny captioned pictures your friends post on Facebook, like this one:



In this sense, the word meme is defined as “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media.” There’s an entire site called [Know Your Meme](#) dedicated to explaining popular memes.

Many of these memes are political in nature. This use of memes, social media, etc. prompted Jeff Giese to write a paper for NATO called “[It’s Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare](#)” in 2015. In it he urged our national security community to rethink information warfare in the social media age.

Giese was prescient. Memes, such as those featuring “Pepe the Frog” developed by members of the site 4chan, were extremely common during the election and a major force in building excitement about the candidacy of Donald Trump. Some of the Trump memes were extremely elaborate. For example, someone created a Trump-themed trailer using “Game of Thrones” footage called “[Winter is Trumping](#)” that racked up almost seven million views. Someone else spliced a large number of video clips and ran them through autotune in order to create a version of Donald Trump covering Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off.”

Memetics (note, not imitation or mimesis) is thus increasingly important in public and cultural narratives in the social media age. That this works is evidenced by the legitimate concern many have that hostile foreign actors from Russia or China might use social media to interfere in US elections, which they have already started to do on a small scale. A recent book even predicts that, as Foreign Policy magazine [puts it](#), “Narrative war has become far more important than physical war.” Narrative today is heavily shaped by social media in addition to traditional media like books or advertising. I think of memetic persuasion as incorporating all of these image and narrative shaping techniques, though with a digital emphasis.

Memetics and Persuasion

Memetics in the broad sense of the term is integral to persuasion. Aristotle identified three modes or components of persuasion: ethos, pathos, logos. *Ethos* is the character of the person doing the persuading. *Pathos* is an emotional appeal. *Logos* is a logical appeal.

We tend to emphasize persuasion as being about logical appeal. But human beings aren’t very logical and don’t make decisions using facts and logic. Instead, we are heavily influenced by emotion and other factors.

Memetics operates at the level of either pathos or ethos. In a narrow sense, memes like those above can have an emotional influence, even if just by making us laugh or raising the morale of supporters of a particular candidate. But in a broader sense, memetics operates at the level of ethos. Ethos is more than just personal character. Ethos is also our “brand,” our reputation, or how others perceive us. A celebrity might be a person of low character, yet have a status or aesthetic appeal that makes him very persuasive. Hence celebrities are often sought out for product endorsements.

When we post things about ourselves on Facebook or Instagram, we are engaging in memetic persuasion, trying to put forth a particular image about ourselves. This is often seen as a false front, but the fact is every person and organization is always sending off memetic signals. The only question is whether we are as intentional about these memetics as we are about our words and logical arguments. This is true for the church as well as individuals.

The Church and Memetics

In [Masc #13](#) I laid out the three cultural worlds Christianity has faced in America over the last few decades:

1. Positive World (Pre-1994). To be seen as a religious person and one who exemplifies traditional Christian norms is a social positive. Christianity is a status enhancer. In some cases failure to embrace those norms hurt you.
2. Neutral World (1994-2014). Christianity is seen as a socially neutral attribute. It no longer had dominant status in society, but to be seen as a religious person is not a knock either. It’s more like a personal affectation or hobby. Traditional norms of behavior retain residual force.
3. Negative World (2014-). In this world, being a Christian is a social negative, especially in high status positions. Christianity in many ways is seen as undermining the social good. Traditional norms are expressly repudiated.

Today’s church is divided between a legacy positive world contingent (typically religious right types) and a neutral world contingent of mostly urban based cultural engagement types. Each has their own characteristic memetic styles.

Positive World Memetics - Televangelists

I drew a parallel between some of the positive worlders and [Alex Jones/InfoWars](#). Jones is a showman and pitchman who has a niche, low status follower base interested in his conspiracy theories and rants calling for listeners to take back America. This sounds like a knock on Jones, but in fact he is a skilled, shrewd, and sophisticated operator. His “niche” has a few million people in it and is very lucrative for him. There’s an obvious similarity between Jones and the televangelists and prosperity gospel purveyors.

To be clear, there are other, non-televangelistic positive worlders out there. But given that I doubt I have many readers in this category and that they serve a legacy (though sizeable) market, I will not say much more about them.

Neutral World Memetics - Hillsong

Regarding the neutral worlders, I said, “[The neutral world church] tries to avoid highlighting areas where Christianity is in conflict with the world. Instead of being antagonistic towards the culture, it is explicitly positive towards culture. In fact, you could sum up much of the model under the heading ‘cultural engagement.’ They want to meet the culture on its own terms, and reach people as participants in a pluralistic public square.”

The neutral worlders resultantly have a very low conflict and highly assimilationist memetic. I’ll give a couple of examples. One of them is Hillsong Church. Hillsong positions itself as the “cool Jesus” hipster church. Justin Bieber and other celebrities attend. The pastoral staff is known for wearing designer clothing. The attendee base skews very young (at least in NYC, which is the source of my first hand knowledge).

Hillsong is [known for its music](#), which is ubiquitous in Christian churches. The original Australian church was called “Hills Christian Life Centre”, but rebranded as Hillsong after their music arm went superstar. Today they have expanded world wide, mostly into the coolest global cities: New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, etc. I’ve been to a number of their services in NYC.

Hillsong services have high production values and a rock concert vibe. Their ushers are shiny happy people. Their musicians are excellent. One interesting thing that Hillsong did, intentionally or not, is own the cheesy Evangelical optic of people lifting their hands during the music portion of the service. But they shifted it into a rock concert register where it seems natural. Even secular people pump their fists in the air during a high-energy set. They encourage tweeting and instagramming during the service. The preaching, which frequently seems to feature guest speakers, tends towards a high-energy, motivational speaker style. It reminds me of Tony Robbins.

There’s a documentary about the making of a Hillsong United live album that you can [watch on Amazon](#). Here’s a shot from it that gives you a feel for them.



Carl Lentz, the main NYC pastor, is frequently in the mainstream media, mostly in pop culture focused publications like [GQ](#) and TV shows like the View. He's very media savvy and generally does a good job of dodging difficult questions. If you want to see him in action, watch his [segment on the View](#) from last October.

In short, Hillsong presents church as a hip, cool, urban thing to do.

Neutral World Memetics - Redeemer

The second style I'll highlight is Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. Redeemer's memetics are much more high end than Hillsong's. Redeemer also has excellent production values and musicians, but you're more likely to hear a classical quartet or jazz ensemble than Christian pop. Its aura is much more intellectual and fine arts oriented. Keller is more likely to be featured in the New Yorker or the Atlantic than pop culture outlets.

Redeemer almost exudes a self-consciously anti-hip vibe. Keller himself has a professorial demeanor. Not the memetics of the picture pastor Tim Keller uses on [his own personal page](#):



This is much stronger body language that it might appear at first glance, but is also very nonthreatening. Keller is known for his preaching and apologetics rather than personal style, yet he's charismatic in his own low-key way. His approach is explicitly irenic rather than confrontational. Redeemer's appeal is to a refined, professional demographic that operates at relatively elite levels of American business and culture. Someone from that secular demographic can walk into Redeemer and find a comfortable, non-threatening environment.

Both Hillsong and Redeemer are very successful, well-patronized churches. Both of them use a memetic strategy based on communicating that "we are just like you [neutral world]" and which delivers aesthetic and programmatic excellence in markets where that's expected. It's a memetic strategy, blending both new and other media, that has delivered results in the neutral world.

The Negative Turn

As I previously noted, the neutral world church faces fundamental challenges as society transitions further into a negative world. As society becomes much more implicitly or explicitly hostile to Christianity, and merely identifying as Christian degrades status, it will be progressively more difficult for them to synchronize with the culture without fatally compromising their beliefs, if they can pull it off at all.

How can the church respond to this? My favorite Tim Keller book is [Center Church](#), which is essentially his handbook on how to start a church in the city. What's distinctive about Keller is that he has both a methodology and a meta-methodology. His methodology is how Redeemer operates. His meta-methodology is how to create a methodology that is specific to and effective in a particular local context. I use *contextualization* as a shorthand for his meta-methodology, since it is one of his favorite terms. People who just clone Redeemer miss the real secret sauce because they are taking a methodology that was developed for a specific context and trying to apply it to a different one.

Kathy Keller recently put up [a blog post of lessons learned](#) from her 30 years of ministry that illustrates both forms. Some of her lessons are clearly methodology. For example, she talks about how "You absolutely must comb out all of the Christian subcultural phrases that clutter up so much of the Christian church." Why? "The cultural moment that we're in now loathes evangelical Christians, and we don't need to give them any more reasons to disrespect and dislike us." We see here clearly that she a) expounding a methodology ("avoid pious babble") that is b) culturally anchored (they don't like us) and c) neutral world in orientation (avoid offending the world).

She also talks about meta-methodology when she says, "Precedent means nothing" and talks about using "trial and error" to figure out what would work in NYC. She noted, "*Nothing* could be done simply because it had been successful somewhere else, or because churches had always done it that way. We had to ask, 'Did it fit New York?'"

Redeemer did not spring forth fully formed from the brow of Tim Keller. He had to come in and figure it out. He not only did figure it out, but more impressively figured out how he figured it out. He was able to extract the lessons of Redeemer into a meta-methodology that others could use to establish churches in even contexts that are different from Redeemer's. This is one reason he stands above your average successful pastor.

The challenge then is how to contextualize church for the negative world, something I noted I've seen little focus on apart from Dreher's Benedict Option (itself a sort of proto-meta-methodology). Let's be honest that contextualization is hard, but re-contextualization is even more difficult. Keller focuses heavily on starting new churches because he observes that new churches are more effective than established ones at reaching new people. I believe part of reason is because churches are contextualized to the moment of their founding, but the world changes around them and their approach becomes gradually less effective over time. Hence it's likely the negative world responses are being developed in smaller, newer churches and movements we don't know about yet.

Like companies or even cities, churches seem to follow a maturity curve that ends in decline. Why is a question worth pondering. I might suggest that the use of business strategy and management ideas in the world of the church imports all their weaknesses as well as their strengths, including inevitable methodological decay. But for our purposes, the key is that the church must contextualize or recontextualize for the negative world. I will talk about one possible avenue for this in terms of memetics.

Minority Religion Memetics

In the negative world, there's an agonistic relationship between the church and the world, whether or not the church seeks it out. But unlike with positive worlder thinking, there's no prospect in sight of dominating or even much influencing the direction of secular culture or potentially even thinking that's not even something to aspire to. Christianity may get reduced to a relatively small minority.

This space requires the masculine virtues because being a cultural minority requires being comfortable with something of a low status or outlier memetic that is self-consciously different. But understanding that you are in that minority position opens up tremendous cultural space too. Historically Christianity, as a default national faith, had to ensure a relatively broad based, mainstream appeal. That's no longer a requirement. What does that give the church the freedom to do?

The memetics of other minority religions can help us understand what this future might look like. I am inspired by these guys:



Photo Credit: Adam Jones, CC BY-SA 2.0

Despite being a tiny minority, Hasidic Jews have immense confidence in being highly visibly distinct from mainstream society. Their very appearance (memetics) conveys that while they don't care what you do, they are doing something different and are not ashamed of it.

Muslims are another group that figured it out. You've probably seen pictures of people observing the Muslim prayer times in the streets of various Western cities. Islam, as a universalist religion, is more culturally aggressive than Judaism. The memetics of praying in the street make clear that they are not just broadcasting distinctiveness but symbolically occupying territory. Nevertheless it's a self-confident, attractional memetic for a minority religion in Western countries. There's a lot to learn from Muslim communities.

Christian Memetics Reconsidered

Christianity is fundamentally a religion of the Word. The gospel is Good News, not Good Aesthetics. So the logos aspect must be right. That's a precondition to anything more.

Where memetics comes in is creating the ethos and pathos that attract people who are willing to sign up for a status lowering religion. I posit that this requires showing that the church has something you can't get from the world, and which has the self-confidence to be different.

In the negative world the church has to be distinct, not assimilationist, in the manner (if not the exact way) of the early church. The early church had many distinctives from the surrounding culture: they refused to worship the culture's gods, they avoided many of the practices approved of by the culture, and they established their own practices like refusing to abandon the sick. They had a community that was difficult to be part of, but which generated immense value as well (in addition to possessing metaphysical truth). They did this by and large without attacking anyone else (though they did have what was essentially an intragroup feud with Jews who did not buy into Jesus as the Messiah).

I'm going to give one idea for a possible negative world move for the church: a reinvigorated and unapologetic memetic around healthy traditional families.

I noted in [Masc #9](#) that that the church elite, like the secular elite, no longer preaches what it practices (to borrow Charles Murray's phrase) when it comes to marriage and family. The secular elite by and large practices traditional marriage themselves, while promoting everything put for the rest of society.

It's a free country and people can do whatever they want. If people want to practice polyamory, that's their right. I'm not going to stop them. I'm just saying that the church should be out promoting the traditional marriage that they practice just as much as the poly folks are [out repping their lifestyle](#).

It's true that the church too often has plenty of divorces, etc. That's a problem and it needs to be addressed. But it is the case that you do often see a different family style in the church than outside of it, such as happy homeschooling families with large numbers of children.

The church, however, appears to be downplaying family these days. I notice far more articles in the Christian press complaining about how the church makes an idol of marriage than I do ones that actually idolizing it. I also read frequent complaints from various single or childless people that the church should change to better serve them. To the extent I see family extolled, it's often in the form of some story about adoption, or about how someone with a dysfunctional family history found family in the church.

There's nothing per se wrong about singleness, childlessness, or adoption. But these are not, or at least should not be, be the norm. Lifelong marriage and your own children is the normative path for human beings going back to the Garden of Eden.

The pastors I know mostly married young and have several children. My impression is that it used to be that if you'd visit a church web site and click on the pastor's page, you'd commonly see a picture of his family. Matt Chandler's Village Church [still does this](#):



That's a great looking family.

Today I see this less and less. Instead I commonly encounter corporate style head shots. To test this, I recently made a list of every Evangelical congregation in Manhattan below 96th St. that I could think of. I came up with 30. Then I visited their web sites and looked at the pastor page to check out the pictures. Only two of the churches (<7%) had pictures of the pastor's family. Five others showed the pastor's wife but not children – but three of those were churches where the husband and wife were co-pastors.

New York is a city full of lonely people (America as a whole [is lonely too](#)), many of them singles and longing to find marriage. This was a big part of the premise behind the show Sex and the City, which obviously tapped into those desires. Yet the churches here aren't showing people a picture of what that looks like, or doing much to help people find it.

In 2009, New York magazine did a [profile of Redeemer](#) that used this picture of its members.



To be clear, this was the magazine's photo montage, not Redeemer's. But I was really struck that it didn't include a single picture of a traditional family (mom, dad, and children).

As I pointed out in [Masc #9](#), the traditional family is something that is attractive to a lot of people. I talked about how many women were incredibly positive, even envious, towards my wife when they found out she did not move in with me before marriage and that we did not engage in pre-marital sex. Even if you apply a discount to affirmatory comments, which I do, these went well beyond politeness. My wife was taken aback by it. It was clear to her that, despite being liberated big city women who would probably never declare is publicly, these women at some level still really longed for the fairy tale of a traditional relationship, even if they weren't making choices in that direction. People continue to notice that's there's something different about her - something they want. For example, not that long ago a woman in our church reached out to her and said, "You're the kind of person I want be. Can we get together and talk?"

So a small step towards negative world contextualization might be stronger memetic presentation of the families you already have in your church. Folks like Brad Wilcox at the Institute for Family Studies can make logos based appeals for marriage (e.g., demonstrating through studies that if you are single you are statistically more likely to die young), but as a scholar he's not in a position to go beyond that. But as I pointed out before, people don't make decisions based on facts and logic. So there's a need for ethos and pathos as well. That's where better memetic messaging by the church on marriage can play an important role in shaping how Christians live and drawing people in.

Rod Dreher once [linked to a tweetstorm](#) by someone who was lamenting the social collapse of his hometown that ended like this:

Tweeting, writing, podcasting has all been a part of it. I'm done just writing because we need to build, curate, cultivate. We do not have a single institution on our side. So build them. There are millions of confused and worried people out there. Reach them. There are so many people in private hungry for competent, strong leadership. Be the lighthouse. The storm is here and it will only get worse.

"Be the lighthouse." That's a philosophy for the negative world. Find a way to build a healthy Christian family despite the legal and social encouragement of divorce. Then make sure others can see that it's possible, that there's a different way to live their lives. Be the lighthouse that guides others into the same harbor. Help them find it for themselves instead of just affirming them in what they are doing when that's taking them further from where they want to go. We're all about helping people pick up the pieces when things go wrong. That's a right and proper thing to do. I've personally benefited from that kind of help. But we far less enthusiastic about putting forth as normative paths that might lead a different direction. Being the lighthouse means more than just writing and tweeting. But I don't think it means less than that.

This won't be popular. Christianity certainly won't get the same treatment as Islam or Orthodox Judaism. Look at what happened to Mike Pence when he took basic steps to protect his marriage. Chip and Joanna Gaines [were attacked](#) when they announced they would be having their fifth child. The United Kingdom is [banning advertisements](#) that feature traditional motherhood. Advocates in Australia want to [ban stay at home moms](#). It likely won't be popular in many quarters inside the church either.

Maybe that's not the battle you want to fight. If not, then what is? Now that the world has changed, what are you doing to recontextualize yourself and church for it? As Tim Keller put it, "Everyone contextualizes – but few think about how they are doing it." Be one of the new who considers it – and explicitly how you are establishing your memetic strategy as part of that for the negative world. If other minority religions are any guide, it will have to be something self-confidently distinct and comfortable being low status.

By the way, you who is fighting this battle about family ? The Mormons. Their memetics around family are spectacular.



I live just down the street from the Mormon temple in NYC. I can see the Mormon families coming down Columbus Ave. from many blocks away, the husband in a suit, the wife in a skirt, and several well-behaved children and often a stroller in tow. Sometimes you can see waves of them coming along, one right after another. In their own way they stick out as much as Hasidic Jews.

In 2011 a hard core feminist writer at Slate posted that she [couldn't stop reading Mormon housewife blogs](#), asking, "I'm a young, feminist atheist who can't bake a cupcake. Why am I addicted to the shiny, happy lives of these women?"

Indeed, Mormon bloggers like Holbrook make marriage and motherhood seem, well, fun. Easy. Joyful. These women seem relaxed and untouched by cynicism. They throw elaborate astronaut-themed birthday parties for their kids and go on Sunday family drives to see the fall leaves change and get mani-pedis with their friends. They often have close, large extended families; moms and sisters are always dropping in to watch the kids or help out with cake decorating. Their lives seem adorable and old-fashioned and comforting.

"I've gotten e-mails from readers thanking me for putting a positive spin on marriage and family," Holbrook says. "It's important to acknowledge the hard parts — and I think we all do — but why not focus more on the lovely and the beautiful? That positive attitude is a very common theme throughout all aspects of the Mormon faith."

The Toronto Star also notes that, "[Mormon mommies have the best blogs](#)." It's not just mommy bloggers. Brett McKay of the popular Art of Manliness is a Mormon. It's not well known, but the couple that started the uber-hipster magazine Kinfolk were Mormon and drew on that memetic. (They later apostatized, which I believe is one reason the quality of the magazine and its aesthetics have significantly declined over time).



Kinfolk dinner in Portland [via West Elm](#). Note how they drew on the imagery and emotional resonance of traditional family dinners in a way that was forward looking and of the now, just retro-nostalgia.

Guess what religion is actually growing at a strong clip in our secular age? You guessed it, Mormonism.

As for me personally, I see so much hunger and so much pain out there from people seeking after family that this is something I am planning to take on myself. So stay tuned for possible future memetic initiatives from me on this. If you know of any good material on it or are particularly interested in this, please reach out and let me know.

The Meaning of Jordan Peterson

After writing a bit about Jordan Peterson in this newsletter in the past, Mere Orthodoxy asked me to contribute an article about him, which you can now [read online](#).

Some guy on twitter attacked the editor of Mere Orthodoxy for giving me a platform to write that. I'm not surprised. This is the new normal, even inside Christianity. It's one reason I conceived my masculinity project from the ground up as negative world operation. I'm writing using my own platforms, not trying to access others. I am not planning to build this up through articles in high profile outlets, speaking at conferences, raising funding from donors, etc. If a quality outlet like Mere Orthodoxy wants me to write for them, that's great and I might just do it. If you want to write me a check, I'd probably take it. But platform access and validating by gatekeepers is not core to what I'm doing. Maybe I would be bigger if I did that. But I see what that business model is doing, and it's not for me. I'd rather fail doing this than succeed the neutral world way, which would require me to keep my views within a fairly narrow band.

Make no mistake: this is an outside the Overton Window project. That's of necessity. The church needs yet another person saying the same old stuff on masculinity again like it needs a hole in the head. If I'm not challenging that, I'm not needed here and could spend my time much more productively on other endeavors. So buckle up.

The Low Status of Christianity

Dean Abbott wrote a recent series of posts on Christianity as a low-status religion that is relevant to my discussion this newsletter.

[Christian belief is a mark of low status](#)

["Engaging the culture" doesn't work because Christian beliefs are a mark of low status](#) - "In recent decades, a plethora

of evangelical ministries has emerged designed to 'engage the culture'. A Google search for "engage the culture" returns more than half a million results. Moreover, a huge number of operations designed to inculcate a Christian worldview and provide apologetics training are booming. In short, the evangelical effort to reverse America's slide toward secularism and decadence has been vigorous and pervasive. It has also been, largely, a failure. The evidence is plain."

[Christianity and low status: a few reflections](#) - "Evangelical efforts to 'engage the culture' proceeded without taking into account the reality of social dynamics. They proceeded as if most people chiefly adopt their identities and beliefs from some source other than their social group. They failed to see that most people are unwilling to associate themselves with traditional Christian belief when doing so puts at risk their social status and the privileges attached to it."

[Christian belief and low social status: four responses](#) - "The cultural shift that dislodged traditional Christianity from its place as the foundation of American culture has provoked a number of responses among believers. Though these responses may seem infinitely varied on the surface, the bulk of them can actually be categorized under four headings: accommodation, appeasement, acceptance and aggression."

[The low status of Christian belief is part of a larger problem](#)

[The source of your pain is cultural collapse](#) - "When a culture slides into decadence, it does not go quickly. Rather, it oozes into progressively more degraded forms of itself. Cultures rarely end through explosion. They end instead over the course of decades through apathy, attrition and acedia."

[Modern loneliness is like nothing that has come before](#) - "We identify with Carol not just because she is a person, but also because she is a modern person, without family, without faith, without community, identity or belonging. Like all modern people, she attempts to find solace from her losses in experience. She fulfills her dream of seeing Paris. She climbs to a high spot, looks out across the surrounding settlement and finds that something is missing. Rather than being overcome by the glory of the city, her mind rolls back to the last time she felt loved. We've all been there. The modern world is a machine and its output is millions upon millions of lonely Carols."

Noteworthy

Institute for Family Studies: [Please don't hide your happy marriage](#).

NYT: [The Unorthodox Matchmaker](#) - How many churches have someone like this around?

Yocheved Lerner-Miller is a matchmaker for Orthodox Jews who come from unorthodox backgrounds. "Look, the perfect boy from the top yeshiva and the perfect girl from the best seminary probably don't need me," she said, sitting inside Choco Latte, a kosher coffee shop in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. "I deal with divorced people. I deal with older singles who are already in their 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond. Sometimes they're just people who somehow missed the boat, or they're converts." ... Ms. Lerner-Miller has earned a reputation in the community for pairing up oddballs and outliers — words she uses affectionately and with which she identifies."

In Masc #19 I talked about using an ABA' pattern of delivering tough feedback. Someone wrote to me pointing out that Jesus used the same pattern in his letter to the church of Ephesus, and even forward [a short sermon snippet](#) on it.

First Things: [A Tradition Unlike Any Other](#)

City Journal: [The Grandparent Trap](#)

Psychology Today: [Is Toxic Masculinity a Valid Concept?](#)

Coda

"I've never been shy about expressing my thoughts, much to the horror of my parents, who were constantly covering their ears with their hands and whispering, 'This too shall pass.' I'll regale my kids' bus driver, Otto, with my story of having to snap a chicken's neck when I was a teenager living on a farm in Nowheresville, Spain, or say something naughty on a late night talk show. Some of my most existential conversations have been conducted with the posse of strangers I see at the dog park every day. However, there's one topic that induces panic. When I hear words like marriage and spouse, I start to sweat. You see, I have a dirty little secret. A secret that keeps me from diving into

some of the more titillating conversational waters.

Deep breath. Here goes: I'm happily married. It might be my most boring attribute, and there's nothing I can do about it! I love my husband and he loves me.

...

The question has to be asked: When did a happy marriage become so taboo? Sitcoms depict married life as a bickering couple; he's usually heavy and not very attractive, and she's usually too smart and beautiful for him. There's a lot of eye rolling. The couple grudgingly put up with each other and a laugh track. Switch to a cable drama: one of them has murdered the other. The best-selling books and records are always slanted toward relationships gone bad. And how would daytime talkshows survive if we couldn't trawl for signs of infidelity or enforce paternity tests? It's embedded in our culture.

The few couples I know with good marriages keep it on the down-low. We meet after dusk at nondescript, out-of-the-way joints. Sometimes Brooklyn, sometimes one of our homes. We close the shades. We make sure nobody sees us holding hands, giggling, or, God forbid, embracing. So until things in our country change, I will have to become masterful at changing the subject and, in some cases, flat out lying about the state of my union."

- Ali Wentworth, "[When Did a Happy Marriage Become So Taboo?](#)"

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