

Courtesy Anjum Chaudhry



Anjum Chaudhry, awardwinning journalist and founder of masalamommas.com

that one word: marriage co-existence is taking on more alternative forms

Some do it for love, for mom and dad, for money, and some simply give in and do it for the tax benefits.

Then again, some don't do it at all.

Marriage. It's a loaded word. Put "second," "broken," or "gay" in front of it and you've got a story told in no time.

According to the 2001 General Social Survey, more than 16 million Canadians are married. That's more than half the country's population engaging in one specific activity. If that activity was reading *Twilight* or flushing regrettable reptilian pets down the toilet, the military would be all over it.

Simply put, marriage is an overwhelmingly socially acceptable way to live with a member of the opposite sex and reproduce/fulfill one's sexual desires. However, alternatives are becoming increasingly common, with surprising results. Statistics Canada's 2006 census found that out of a population of 2.5 million in the city of Toronto, around 472,000 of them were common-law couple families. That's one fifth of the city's population. Numbers for married-couple families are not that far ahead, at around 670,000 for the same year.

So where is human co-existence headed? Will marriage head straight out the door or through a fiery revival due to the gay rights movement? Will it die as an institution with no purpose, replaced with other legal means of establishing a long-term relationship?

Statistics show that one third of all Canadians don't stay in their marriage till the 30th year. In fact, they divorce much earlier. From the hippie flower-wearing days of the 60's till the present, the ultimate point of marriage has changed from a focus on being a reproductive family unit to each individual striving for personal happiness.

Meet Joel Clark. He's the 35-years-old general manager at the University of Toronto's Scarborough Campus Students' Union. He lives with his common-law wife Veronica and his 6-years-old daughter Sophie in a house they rented right after he and his wife split.

That's right, they split. They didn't find each other as romantically compatible as they were 11 years ago.

"It's a little non-standard," he said. "It works really well for us."

Born in Stoney Creek, Ontario, Clark aimed to get out of his hometown as fast as he could. He moved to Toronto when he was 18.

His story is astonishingly eye opening. He and his wife basically dated other people while raising a child together. They lived as friends instead of ex-lovers, living and dealing separately with unresolved issues and custody battles.

"There's all kinds of different ways to have a relationship and nobody gets to tell you what to have except you," he explained.

Then there's Anjum Chaudhry. She comes from a conservative South Asian culture but was born to a relatively liberal set of parents who insisted that she get a career as an award-winning journalist before thinking about marriage.

When she first met her future husband, she didn't think twice about him. It was at a mutual friend's summer barbecue, she wasn't exactly looking, and he didn't think she was exceptionally hot.

Less than a year later, they were happily married.

Mark Kuiack is a university student with parents who are married and literally live on opposite ends of the globe from one another. "They're married but they're not really married," he shrugged. "I don't know if they're really in love anymore."

These people are not anomalies. You'll meet them in class, at work or on the street. Maybe your story mirrors one of theirs, or maybe yours has more shock value.

Point is, we can't lump all married couples in Toronto under one of three umbrellas: happy, working-on-it or unhappy. We can no longer lump ourselves into one of five umbrellas either: single, married, divorced, widowed or cheating.

Kelly Rankin has been with her "significant other" Kyle for around 15 years. She hesitates a bit at using the term "husband" to describe him but soon realizes that it's silly to be afraid of a label. Rankin works at the University of Toronto, updating its news website. She's a little taken aback when asked to evaluate the reasons behind her decision to live common-law. She's nervous, carefully mulling it over in her head.

Mark Kuiack, University of Toronto student and holder of unusual views on all things under the sun



Courtesy Jessica Lee

“Two people agreeing to stay together isn't necessarily natural” — Kuiack

"When I was younger, in my late teens and early 20s, some of my friends at the time, people were getting married and everything," she mused. "It was one of those things I wasn't in a hurry to do." Common-law unions are becoming less unusual and may even be the result of higher socioeconomic status and better education. Statistics Canada's 2006 census shows that common-law families have on average a higher median income (\$70,000) than married couple families (\$66,000).

Even then, the language surrounding marriage and the proper way to live with a partner fails to catch these changes.

"A waiter at a restaurant once said 'You're married but not church-ed!'" she laughed. "I thought that was a funny way of putting it."

Clark was never a fan of weddings. He and his partner were engaged for a while but after giving birth to Sophie, they decided that rearing her was a bigger priority than throwing a grand she-bang to announce their marriage.

"As far as [my parents] are concerned, if we're acting like a family, we're a family," he explained. "As far as her parents are concerned, if we're acting like a family, we're a family and we should just suck up our differences and get married. Church or not, legally get married."

That feeling is in no small part due to Veronica's mother being a lawyer. Both families are concerned about the legal ramifications of remaining common-law. If something were to happen to one partner, the other would not receive the same benefits or legal rights unless they were married.

Clark recalls being in his mid-twenties, stressed out over graduate school and wanting to just study, play videogames, and then go back to studying.

"Guys of my generation are still in that extended man-child kind of world and it takes a while to sort of settle down and decide what you want to do as a job," the Rotman School of Management graduate said.

Now that Sophie is 6 and college will be a reality within the next

ten years, Clark isn't sure about where his family is headed.

"We may go our separate ways, she may move back to Ottawa to take care of her parents, and I may stay here or go wherever my job happens to be," he said, half-thinking out loud. "And then we'll just be sort of a remote family."

Kuiack's parents are the definition of a remote family. With his mother in British Columbia, his father in Australia and he himself in Toronto, he finds that his family is more or less together in name.

"Two people agreeing to stay together isn't necessarily natural," he explained.

Anjum Chaudhry sees things heading in a positive direction. Marriages and the obligations and social norms that come with them change over time as a society changes.

However, some things never change, such as the importance of having a traditional wedding.

"It's your marriage but your parents wedding," she said. "You marry a family and vice versa."

Coming from a culture that is often stereotyped worldwide for having arranged marriages, she finds that her experience was wholly different.

"In this day and age, really?" she said. "I think families are just happy that you have someone as a partner in your life."

Like Chaudhry, Clark finds that things are changing for the better. Living with a partner outside of marriage was frowned upon to some extent even ten years ago. Nowadays, it's becoming normal to live common-law with your spouse before deciding to marry.

"If you're not good at monogamy, don't make monogamous commitments," he said firmly. "Make serial commitments or find somebody else who has parallel commitments and that's okay."

Maryam Shah personally finds weddings boring, unless they take place under the sea. To read more about marriage, visit ejectmagazine.com