

MODERN LOVE

The Secret to Marriage Is Never Getting Married

By Gabrielle Zevin

Oct. 6, 2017

I am often asked if I am married. Sometimes I lie and say that I am. Sometimes I lie and say that I am not. Neither answer feels entirely truthful to me.

If I say I am not married, the true answer, people occasionally try to set me up with their offspring. They seem to think I would be a great daughter-in-law. Actually, I would be a great daughter-in-law. I send thank-you cards. I am a terrific conversationalist. I can bake a pie.

I met the man I am not married to the second week of college.

“You’re wearing black,” Hans said. “I’m wearing black.”

This was said with some irony; we were standing in a black box theater. Everyone was wearing black. He had a girlfriend, so we didn’t get together until several months later. We have been together ever since, 21 years.

A year before I met Hans, a relative of his opened a credit card in his name and charged the better portion of another relative’s wedding. And then she forgot to pay the bill. For years. Forever, actually.

Hans didn’t find out until two years after the crime, when he was applying to graduate school. Even after making arrangements to pay off the debt, his credit was ruined and he couldn’t get student loans. The credit card company told him the only way to clear his credit would be to take the relative to court. Identity theft is a serious crime, the company said, and she could possibly go to jail.

Hans wouldn’t do it because the woman had a child, and he didn’t want the child to grow up without a mother. I liked that about him. He was in his early 20s and less than poor. But what difference did it make? He was a person of integrity, and we were in love. We had been together six months.

It can be awkward to describe this situation to people I don’t know. They tend to ask follow-up questions: “Why didn’t you just clear the credit cards and then get married?”

“Why didn’t I?” I say lightly.

The answer is: many reasons. Because I was 18 when I met him and didn’t know how long the relationship would last. Because it was a lot of money and I was embarrassed to ask my parents for help. Because neither of us had regular jobs and we both wanted to be artists more than we wanted to be married people. Because one of us needed good credit in order to rent apartments and charge groceries. Because by the time we had the means to make honest people of ourselves, we felt as if we had been together too long to bother.

But I don’t say any of these things.

“Don’t you like weddings?” someone will ask.

I love weddings. The odd mix of religion, government and pageantry moves me. It’s like theater, but with real people.

I have been to weddings. I have seen the white dresses. I have worn the bridesmaid dress. I have smelled the roses. I have never caught the bouquet, but I have watched its trajectory with enthusiasm. I have heard the wedding band play “Shout,” and I have gotten a little bit louder now.

I have shopped the registries, and I have sent the pasta makers, the towels, the knives and the vases. I am comfortable with the fact that as a person who has no plans to marry, I will not receive the pasta maker, the towel, the knives or the vase in return.

Hans and I have been together a long time, and for better or for worse, we have those things already.

My accountant recently broached the subject of marriage with me. He has been my accountant for the last 13 years, and I feel as if he’s my second most important long-term relationship. We were discussing whether I should consider getting married now.

I said, “It feels like it has been too long.”

I guess because I am turning 40 this year, he said, “Well, there are reasons to be married when you are old.” The reasons fell largely into two categories: What happens when I die? And what happens if I get sick and then die?

Once, on the way back from Japan, a customs agent was furious at Hans and me for sharing a checked suitcase when we weren’t related. We were not family, which meant we needed to speak to customs separately. So how to deal with the problem of a shared suitcase? What was a customs agent to do?

“Well, you see,” I remember saying, “when he was in college, a relative opened up this credit card, and...”

Basically, this encounter encapsulated the reason to get married at this peaceful midpoint of our lives. Because as you get old, per my accountant, life becomes a series of skirmishes with customs agents.

I know he is right. At this point, though, the math bothers me. I don’t want to start over again at Year 1. I worry that if Hans and I were to get married now, it would somehow be like saying the last two decades didn’t count.

I have had four dogs with the man I am not married to. I have dedicated several of my books to him, but really, they all could be. He is my most important reader and creative collaborator. We have traveled the world with one suitcase. We have cooked more than 100 Blue Apron meals without killing each other. We have shared a dozen different addresses. We have built a life. But we are not married. We live in California, which means we are not even common-law married.

Some time ago — we had not been married for 15 years — when we had an apartment by Riverside Park in New York, Hans woke up, looked out the window and said with boyish, almost biblical conviction, “Everything is telling me that’s Kristen Schaal.”

She was on one of our favorite shows, “The Flight of the Conchords.” We went down to walk our dog and the woman was still sitting in the park.

It was not Kristen Schaal. It could not have been less Kristen Schaal. And now we say this to each other all the time: “Everything is telling me that’s Kristen Schaal.” It is amazing how often this can be worked into conversation. This won’t be funny to anyone but the man I am not married to.

Our friends recently got divorced. They had been together as long as we had, and I had thought they were happy. But you can never know what goes on between two people. I asked her, “What percentage of time would you say you were happy?”

“Twenty percent,” she said. Several weeks later, she revised her estimate: “Maybe 2 percent.”

“Two!” I said. “How can a person live in a state of 2 percent happiness?”

“Perhaps 3,” she revised again.

Hans and I are happy together most of the time. We have the usual domestic squabbles. Our most frequent argument ends with him throwing up his hands and saying, “I’m not a handyman!”

Sometimes I think the secret to a long and happy marriage is never to get married in the first place, although there are surely married couples that are as happy as we are.

Not long ago, when a woman asked me the marriage question, I stumbled on what I believed to be the correct answer: “I have been with the same man for more than two decades, but I am not sure either of us believes in marriage.” I felt clever for stating my situation so concisely.

“Belief,” she scoffed. “Belief is for little children and Santa Claus.”

She was right. It’s just words to say I don’t believe in marriage. Having stayed with a person for more than 20 years, I must believe in marriage. I must believe that life is better in a pair than it is single.

When I say I don’t believe in marriage, what I mean to say is: I understand the financial and legal benefits, but I don’t believe the government or a church or a department store registry can change the way I already feel and behave.

Or maybe it would. Because when the law doesn’t bind you as a couple, you have to choose each other every day. And maybe the act of choosing changes a relationship for the better. But successfully married people must know this already.

I wake up in the morning and I look at Hans and think, I love you. I choose you above any other person. I chose you 21 years ago and I choose you today. I believe you to be a constant in my life, and I, a constant in yours. Loving you is the closest thing I have to faith. Everything is telling me that’s Kristen Schaal.