
Catholic novelist, Walker Percy, once made fun of the self-help genre by giving one of his books the playful title: *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*. Creating a kind of “mock” self-help book designed to encourage us to think about who we are, rather than how we can be more beautiful, successful, thin, and confident, Percy designed a different kind of self-help book, meant to provoke rather than to reassure. Always the Catholic, Percy simply wanted to remind us that life is difficult as we all are “Strangers in a Strange Land.” But, he also wanted to tell us that life is a mystery and love is a delight, and that God is the infinite mystery and the infinite delight.

It is in this spirit that Hoover Institution Research Fellow and academic economist, Jennifer Roback Morse, offers us her own version of a self-help book in *Smart Sex*. As with all self-help books, Morse offers a promise to help us “Find Life-Long Love in a Hook-up World.” But, unlike most self-help books with “sex” in the title, Morse offers no suggestions on how to choose the perfect lover, or how to improve our lovemaking techniques. Instead of reassuring us that we too can find the perfect mate, or have the perfect marriage, she reminds us that none of us are perfect in an imperfect world. And, those who seek such perfection in a mate are doomed. While Morse offers some practical suggestions on how to deal with feelings and communication, and she begins the book with the promise that *Smart Sex* “is about how and why to stay married,” the real focus of *Smart Sex* is much deeper. Early in her book, Morse advises us that “the self help books aren’t going to be enough because they deal with the superficial symptoms of much deeper problems.” Instead of techniques, Morse focuses on the nature and meaning of sex and marriage. Instead of easy answers, Morse explodes some of modern society’s most cherished and destructive myths. She argues that reproductive freedom is an illusion, that recreational sex isn’t really fun, and sex is neither morally neutral nor private. Of course, this has not stopped amazon.com from suggesting on the *Smart Sex* purchasing page that customers interested in this title would be interested in a link that promises to help readers “Hook up with more Women through doubleyourdating.com.”

Dr. Morse would be amused by such a site because she knows that if “hooking up” with more women, or with more men, were the answer, people with many sex partners would be the happiest people of all. But they are not. Morse knows that the idea of sexual freedom has
reduced sex to a commodity—and has left people more empty than before. Ever the economist, Morse provides evidence that what she calls “consumer sex” has left millions of people miserable: “Not only is recreational sex no fun, but consumer sex is profoundly anti-social . . . The sexual revolution has retarded people’s ability to create community life and to relate to one another.” Even worse, our modern sexual moral code does not cultivate an attitude of respect for others. Instead, “our modern sexual ways have led us to believe that we are entitled to use people.”

Morse suggests that the “date rape crisis” that continues to plague many college campuses is a direct result of the problems that have been wrought by recreational sex. While date rape has become a politicized issue that is about power as well as sex, Morse asks the more important question of “why” date rape has become so politicized. She believes that “Date rape points to one of the underlying problems with the notion that all voluntary sexual encounters are morally acceptable . . . . Since wrong and right, good and bad are no longer useable terms in our post-moral, post-modern world, we don’t have many adjectives to describe a negative sexual encounter.” The date rape crisis tells us all something we should have known all along—sex is not simple, sex is not everywhere a good. Instead, Morse suggests that we must “ask ourselves what circumstances and conditions make sex a good or prevent it from being a good.” We should have known that using people and being used by others can only lead to negative outcomes.

Morse points out that we most successfully pursue happiness by being in relationships with others. We find our true happiness only by giving ourselves to others and being able to receive others as gifts to us. In a chapter entitled “The Law of the Gift,” Morse suggests that we look at our lives as gifts to us, and to look at other people’s lives as gifts to themselves, and ultimately to us as well. As Natural Law and Christian revelation teaches us, it is always wrong to view people as means instead of ends. We will always find our deepest happiness when we give ourselves to others—and when we are receptive to the gifts of others. “In other words, a life without self-giving love would not be a truly happy or satisfying life, no matter how many other accomplishments, achievements, or possessions the person might accumulate.”

Dr. Morse has done a favor for all of us in this book because she offers us two things: information and hope. Like all good self-help books, the early chapters help us understand why marriage matters—not just to the individual, but also to the rest of the world. These early chapters provide the foundation for the concluding chapters on human
nature, sociobiology, and revelation. It is a hopeful book because Morse promises us that if we begin to really pay attention to what we are doing, we can improve our lives. For Morse, the vision of the free society must be humanized. We can humanize our lives by realizing how dependent we are on each other—we all must matter to someone.

For those of us who usually recoil at the prospect of reading a self-help book, I can only suggest that this book is not really a self-help book in the way that "How to Hook-up with More Women" is a self-help book. Smart Sex is smart enough to know that no book can provide the easy answers that can make us happy. Still, Jennifer Morse has generously provided help by beginning to light the path toward happiness and fulfillment through living as if life really were a gift from God.

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In God and the World, German journalist Peter Seewald interviews the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, on the inscrutable mysteries of the Catholic faith. The book was first published in German in 2000 and subsequently translated into English. During his years as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger granted three in-depth interviews that were subsequently published as books. Two of those became bestsellers—The Ratzinger Report (1985), in which the Cardinal was interviewed by journalist Vittorio Messori, and Salt of the Earth (1997), in which he was interviewed by Peter Seewald. Because of the success of the two latter books, the Cardinal agreed to a subsequent interview with Seewald which resulted in God and the World.

The Cardinal and Seewald engaged in a series of conversations that took place over a three day period at the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino. This locale was particularly poignant given the Holy Father’s devotion to St. Benedict and his assumption of the name