

JF 1/7/14

Words: 3605; 3534 rev

How to draft an excellent marriage in this age of rampant divorce

A survey of the critical issues to consider during the dating and courtship period that will allow y couple to become marriage ready and then form a relationship that will stand the test of time and bring you all the joy marriage is designed to offer.

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On a local “Ask the Expert” column readers were invited to ask questions about their relationships. Most of those who sent in questions were in troubled relationships. Their descriptions and questions included items such as: “I fell head over heels for him.” “I never thought I could love someone so much.” “I’ve done practically everything I can to get her to love me.” “She said love should come from the heart.” “He told me that he truly believes I am the one.” “Should I stick around and hope things work out?” “How do I react, how do I deal with this?” “I’ve been dating a guy (recently divorced) for four months; everything was great until we slept together.” “I want him to apologize and beg me to come back.” “I want to feel like I did when we first hung out.”

Why does such confusion reign in the arena of romantic relationships? Hoping for this, wishing for that, desperately trying, why have my feelings changed? In other areas of pursuit, it seems so much simpler.

For instance, let’s say you want to be a lawyer. The path may be difficult but it is straight forward in most countries: 1) complete a 4-year undergraduate degree in a related field; 2) Apply to and get accepted at an accredited law school; 3) Complete the coursework required to acquire your Law degree and graduate; 4) Pass the bar exam; 5) Get hired by a law firm (or form your own firm) and, poof! You are a lawyer doing things that lawyers do.

How much sense would comments and questions posed in the first paragraph above make if they were applied to trying to become a lawyer?: “I fell head over heels with the idea of being a lawyer;” “I can’t believe how much I love court-room dramas;” “I’ve done practically everything I can to get my professors to love me,” etc.

If someone tried to become a lawyer based on the comments and questions of the first paragraph, what are the chances of them actually becoming one? The path to be a lawyer is simple but challenging. If you spend eight years going through that process, will your emotions fluctuate from time to time? Of course they will! But surging emotions are not what makes you a lawyer. It is completing steps 1 to 5 regardless of your emotions.

The tormented readers who ask the questions seem to live in a swirling fog of confusion. Is it possible that successful relationships can at least approximate the clarity of becoming a lawyer—difficult, but straightforward?

We believe that to some extent, yes. There are some useful parallels and some differences. But, you don’t expect any analogy to fit perfectly. As C. S. Lewis puts it so aptly: “When Jesus said be like doves He did not mean that we should live in trees and lay eggs.”

Here are areas of potential parallel: First, just like someone preparing to be a lawyer, a successful relationship takes, time, effort and education to learn the fundamental principles. Second, once learned the person needs to apply in his/her own life the principles he or she has learned. Thirdly, recognize that it isn’t easy. Even excellent relationships weather serious challenges. Finally, an extraordinary relationship is not based on your emotions.

For the first three statements I can hear your grunts of agreement and general approval. On the fourth one, though, the blood pressure rises and the sphincters tighten. What do you mean? A great romantic relationship has got to have intense emotions!

I am in full agreement. But reread that final sentence: “An extraordinary relationship is not based on your emotions.” In our world, intense emotions typically follow extensive effort:

Think of the joy of an athlete who wins a championship. Then consider that the joy was preceded by thousands of hours of intense effort. Same principle applies to an actor winning an Oscar, the pianist completing a successful concert, the medical student graduating from medical school.

But how do we do it in relationships? We “fall” in love. We launch ourselves “head over heels” about our special someone. Often these emotions are almost instantaneous. Where is the “work” that is necessary for success in just about every other human endeavor? Is it possible that marriage, the most complicated of all human relationships, can be successful because of our intense feelings? Is it possible that a marriage can thrive without the hard work so necessary in every other human endeavor?

Alas, personal experience, divorce statistics and research findings say “no.” Most romantic relationships start out with intense emotions. Many of these intensely emotional relationships turn into marriage. Fifty percent of these marriages end up in divorce and an additional 30% of these marriages continue but are dysfunctional and unhappy. The start-with-emotions model leaves you with a 20% chance of a successful marriage.

“But, I’m Christian,” or, “I’m a Seventh-day Adventist,” doesn’t that make a difference? Alas, no. The divorce rate for various Christian denominations ranges from 39% to 61% and Adventists are right in the middle of that mix. “How can this be?” asks many a troubled Christian. “Shouldn’t being a Christian ensure successful relationships?” The question requires a closer look:

If I pray several hours a day will this enable me to run a 2:20 marathon? No, running a 2:20 marathon requires excellent talent plus thousands of hours of intense training under expert guidance. If I am a fervent Christian, does this enable me to play Rachmaninoff’s 3rd piano concerto? No, playing the “Rach-3” requires excellent talent plus thousands of hours of intense practice under expert guidance. The same line could be repeated for accomplishment in a thousand different arenas. No, successful relationships don’t “just happen” because you are a

Christian or pray a lot. Just like running a 2:20 marathon or playing the Rach-3, successful relationships require extensive education and application.

So whether or not you are Christian, if you want a successful marriage (or successful relationships in general) you will need to actually take the time to learn principles of successful relationships and apply those principles.

That is the purpose of this article—to begin to acquaint you with these success principles. We have spent the first third of the article underlining the importance of principle Number 1: If you want better than a 20% chance of success in your marriage you will need to educate yourself: attend the classes, read the books, sign up for seminars, watch instructional videos, become marriage ready yourself, and apply the material you learn. We now move to content: Three different broad areas are explored in the remainder of the article: The look inward, the look outward, and the look together.

The look inward

Two statements that date back 2400 years underline the importance of this first step: Socrates tells us: “know thyself,” and “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

- **Identifying personal qualities.** The first step of the look inward is to take inventory of yourself and the array of characteristics you possess that may have an influence on who will make a wonderful life partner. In our seminars we provide participants worksheets to assist them in this process. In this list (that may number as many as 100 items when finished) you identify positive qualities (I’m warm, nurturing, intelligent), neutral qualities (I’m Hispanic, 5’ 10” tall, 32 years old) and negative qualities (I’m a loner, don’t communicate very well, tend to be critical, and procrastinate). The items you put on the list are characteristics that may influence your choice of a partner. The fact that you are an excellent pianist will certainly influence your choice; your hair color, probably not. You may want to run your list past a trusted

friend to gain greater objectivity. Once completed, you can nurture the areas of strength, begin to overcome areas of weakness and simply be aware of the others. By this process, we are fulfilling Socrates command, “know thyself.

- **Becoming marriage ready.** So many singles out there are looking for the “right one.” The lesson of Socrates is that before we *look for* the right one, we must make the effort to *be* the right one. Most people possess some negative qualities that will challenge their relationships and diminish their chances of success. It is important for such people, if they want to ensure a successful marriage that they work to improve in those areas. Others in the dating market are what we call “walking disasters.” They possess so many personal flaws that they could not successfully marry anyone. If they find the “perfect” other, their own demons will destroy or severely compromise that relationship. Someone with an uncontrolled temper, manipulative tendencies, deep-seated hostility or bitterness, the obsessive need to control, selfish, rigid, critical or an array of other negative qualities have no chance of forming a successful marriage. If you possess such qualities, what can you do about it? The answer is simple but, in many cases, agonizingly difficult. Before you start looking for someone else you will need to look to yourself. Make the active choice to overcome personal challenges. In some cases you may need to purchase and read a book and apply its principles to assist in the battle. Some may need to see a qualified therapist to resolve really challenging issues. The contrast between those who make the courageous choice to make those changes and those who don’t is stark. The former group has the potential for a rewarding life and deeply satisfying relationships. The latter will live a miserable life until they die. And, if they marry, they will probably make their partner as miserable as they are.

- **Understanding my essence qualities.** From your personal-qualities list you will identify characteristics that are absolutely central to your identity. Without any one of these qualities you would not really be you. Think of a chocolate-chip cookie. A typical chocolate-chip

cookie may have 10 different ingredients. Cooks may play with the other nine (oat meal instead of flour, for instance), but if you leave out the chocolate chips you no longer have a chocolate-chip cookie. Shift the analogy: if you are an outstanding pianist, music is one of your essence qualities. Without music you wouldn't be you. Likewise, for the deeply committed Christian, life without Christ-as-center is unthinkable. To the young lady whose life revolves around family and family events, she could not imagine a life without it. You seek to identify different areas that are definingly you. Typically an individual would rarely have more than eight or ten essence qualities. If you come up with more than that, you are probably describing interests—things that change over time—rather than essences. We return to the issue of essences qualities in our third section addressing “the look together.”

As we look at the three components of the look inward you can sense that knowledge of these areas will assist in your search for someone with whom you can successfully spend a lifetime.

The look outward

- **The ideal other.** Anyone who desires to marry has already thought of the sort of person they hope for—the mythical “princess” or “knight in shining armor.” In our seminars we extend this process to look with greater depth about personal qualities of that special someone that would generate an exciting, romantic, purposeful and satisfying relationship—that can actually last a lifetime. During seminars we have individuals complete a list of desirable qualities for the “ideal other” in eleven different areas, such as social, family, spiritual, personal habits, interests/passions, and several others. Now, if you look for someone who fits all 50 or 60 of the characteristics you may have written down, you will die single. No one will match. The critical component of the process is to rate the level of importance of each of the 50 or so items. Four different levels of desirability are proposed: 1 = required; 2 = highly desirable; 3 = desirable; and

4 = preference. The 1s and 2s are the qualities that will guide your search. The 3s and 4s may be nice but are not required. If you extend to more than 8 #1-rated items (required) your likelihood of finding someone who matches diminishes. Use the list as a flexible guide, have fun with it, scratch things out and insert new ones, but be keenly aware of the #1s. They are foundational to your quest.

- **Disqualifiers.** The concept of disqualifiers operates in every area of life. If you are a vegetarian and you see “lard” on the ingredient list; disqualifier, you don’t buy it. You see a hot pair of shoes that you love. It says “size 6” on the inside and you wear size 8; disqualifier, you don’t buy them. If you are shopping for a van for your family of 6 and see a sizzling 1957 Thunderbird; disqualifier, the ’57 Thunderbird seats only two. Thousands of times every year we apply this principle. The lettuce is wilted; disqualifier, I will not buy it. Disqualifiers operate just as certainly in the world of relationships. If you are aware of your list of disqualifiers before you begin dating, you are much less likely to get yourself into an impossible relationship. For instance you may know that you will not marry someone who smokes, uses drugs, is non-Christian, is lazy, bitter, dishonest or manipulative. And your list may be longer. If that list is written down and clearly in mind, a disqualifier may reveal itself on a first date and the romantic prospect ceases after one date. This is smart. If you don’t have the list, you may be a year into the relationship before you realize that it cannot work. Then starts the agonizing (and invariably futile) process of trying to change him or her. Avoid the torment and be clear on what you won’t marry. Then you can be friends with many who may possess such qualities, but are smart enough not to pursue a romance.

- **Lure of the sirens.** Humans are biased. Few see things clearly because they see their world through their own interpretive filters. Those filters (and everyone has them) distort their perceptions due to past experiences. Many of these biases operate in areas where there are no negative consequences: I may think Lindsey Lohan is a disaster; or that Robert Downey Jr. is

a terrific actor. Even if I am wrong, my opinions do not affect Lohan, Downey, or myself. But if these biases occur in the arena of important decisions, then disaster and worse can be the result. Take the event of “the proposal.” Young women dream about the day when that event occurs; young men think up creative ways to make the event memorable and compelling. So guy asks gal: The gal is so excited that, in the moment, she forgets that he is manipulative, critical, disagreeable, controlling lazy and alcoholic and says, “yes! Oh yes!” That, my friends, is bias. Our emotions are so strong that reason though fails and we trap ourselves into an impossible relationship.

There are two type of destructive bias. One is intense emotions (illustrated by the proposal example above) and the other is erroneous information or perception. The latter occurs when we are simply wrong about our perceptions: she thought he was generous, he was actually selfish; He thought she was romantic, it was just a tool to get his attention. Finally there are conditions when biases are most likely to occur: the urge for closeness, or the experience of loneliness, fear, or sexual urgency. Such situations provide a fertile ground for serious errors of judgment. Dealing with these biases in the context of relationships is a serious challenge. Fortunately there is good material to help you successfully navigate these dangerous waters.

The look together

- **Matching essence qualities.** We spoke of essence qualities in the Look-Inward section. In the Look-Together section we return to the topic of essence qualities. The reason is that if a couple fills out their 8 or 9 essence qualities independent of each other, the chances are less than one in ten thousand that their lists will be identical. We deal with the reality that even well-matched couples are different and are passionate about different things. Let’s say, for the point of discussion, that each of you has 9 essence qualities listed. It would be pretty important that you have solid matches on at least three of them. For instance you are both deeply spiritual,

academic, and enthused about fitness. For the other six there may be varying levels of concord. For instance “love of children” may be an essence for one, but not for the other. But the other enjoys children it is simply not an essence. The critical thing to be aware of when it comes to unshared essences is this: You must be supportive of your partner’s essences; to do otherwise would make them less of a person than they are.

- **Red flags.** When it comes to savoring your similarities or negotiating your differences, red flags are personal qualities or characteristics that have potential to cause stress in the relationship. Don’t set out on the impossible task of finding someone with whom you have no red flags. All couples have a fair number of these challenges. When negotiated effectively red flags may be rendered harmless. Take an introvert married to an extrovert. This may be a serious red flag. It is quite common for an introvert-extrovert date to be successful. She (the extrovert) babbles continuously and he (the introvert) pays close attention and grunts happy noises. Both are happy. But three years after they marry he wonders whether she will ever shut up and she wonders if he will ever say anything. She tries to get him to a party. He resists. And the entire relationship turns into a nag-resist relationship; and then the relationship dies.

My wife Elizabeth and I have handled the issue differently. She is the extrovert, I am the introvert. We further knew that an extrovert tends to gain energy in a social setting whereas the introvert wears down and eventually seek to escape the noise and confusion. We were aware of this before we married and we dealt with it thoughtfully. Today when a social event occurs, we drive two cars to the event. Prior to the event we identify the socially acceptable time for me to make my exit. I attend. I interact with all the enthusiasm an introvert can muster. Several hours later I make my exit. Our friends chuckle as they observe the introvert returning to his cave. And other introverts attending are green with envy because they have another three hours to go! Elizabeth stays as long as she wishes. We never have conflict over it. When she wants me to go to some social event, I go, and she is careful not to schedule them too often. We have created a

win-win situation in which our friends share in the joke. Similar types of negotiation is part of the process with any number of other potential red flags.

- **Shared passions.** When we explore history's extraordinary marriages, they all seem to have at least one thing in common: a shared passionate goal. Consider some of the legendary marriages and their shared passion: Billy and Ruth Graham, evangelism; Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poetry; Robert and Clara Schuman, music; C.S. and Joy Gresham Lewis, writing Christian books; Pierre and Marie Currie, physics and chemistry. The passionate goals shared by a couple assists in weathering many an issue that may be a serious challenge for a couple who just want to "have a great time." We need to think bigger than our personal fulfillment if we want our marriage to thrive. Elizabeth and I, when going through a tough patch, may say to each other, "Do you think anyone else has ever experienced this challenge?" The answer is always, "Of course they have, millions of times." Because we share a passionate goal of helping people craft more successful marriages that we are motivated to resolve the issue. If we are able to come to resolution ourselves, we are then better equipped to help others facing the same problem.

What we have described in this article is simply an outline of the critical issues to consider during the dating and courtship period. Please take the time in coming days, weeks, months, and years to read the books, attend the seminars, watch the instructional videos and make the applications that will allow you first to become marriage ready yourself and then form a relationship that will stand the test of time and bring you all the joy marriage is designed to offer.

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