

As a married priest, couple’s therapist and researcher, I have had the privilege to counsel hundreds of couples. While doing this work, one conclusion that I have drawn is that good marriages do not simply materialize out of thin air. In the divorce culture in which we live, good marriages are highly dependent on the decisions that people make prior to marriage and during the dating process. For this reason, this brochure which will offer some helpful information for those of you who are of marriageable age and dating.

CHEMISTRY

It used to be that people married for all kinds of reasons, the least of which had much to do with being in love. Some primary reasons why people married in past generations were to form alliances to protect family interests. They also married to have children, thus ensuring that there were plenty of hands to work the family farm. Today things have changed. Ask almost anyone why they married and ninety-nine out of a hundred will state that the number one reason they married their partner is because they were in love. Personally, I wouldn’t recommend that anyone dating consider engagement and marriage if they are not romantically attracted to one another.

By the way, the chemistry of love sometimes happens slowly as two people get to know one another. And at other times, it’s love at first sight. Either way, the sparks should be flying at some point before you decide to get engaged and married.

DON’T RUSH THE PROCESS

Whenever I meet privately with conflicted couples, at some point in my efforts to get to know them I might ask how long they dated before they decided to get married. It’s surprising to me how many indicate that they dated for less than a year. Some might tell me less than six months. When I hear this, I sometimes feel myself cringing because I know it takes time to get to know someone. In fact, research indicates that it takes a minimum of three months for couples to loosen up enough to begin showing their true colors.

Research also indicates that it takes around two years to really get to know your dating partner. Part of the reason has something to do with the fact that it takes that much time to get to know how your partner will react in many different social situations. Beyond this, it also takes time to for you to see how your partner responds to a variety of different types of people, from close family members to complete strangers.

So, don’t rush the dating process, and if you detect something you don’t like, don’t assume it will disappear. The likelihood is that it won’t go away. And worse, whatever behavior or attitude it is that you don’t like will probably become more problematic after marriage. Instead, take the time to get to know your partner’s strengths and weaknesses. And when a red flag appears, don’t ignore it. Otherwise, you will likely regret it.

I can’t tell you how many conflicted spouses I’ve counseled who rushed through the dating process without taking the needed time to get to really know their partner, only to deeply regret this omission after marriage. One young lady with bruises on her arm as a result of being physically abused recently shared the following thoughts with me in my office. “If only I had taken the time, I might have made a wiser decision and not ignored some of the subtle warning signs that suggested he might mistreat me.”

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Data also indicate that people who wait until they reach their mid-twenties significantly increase their probability of being happily married, and staying happily married. Why? Actually, it’s not really hard to understand why this might be true. People who wait until they reach their mid to upper twenties are more likely to have finished college, and are likely more mature than their peers who marry earlier. These factors put them in a better position to make wise choices.



COMPATIBILITY

What similarities do you share with your partner? Do you have a similar perspective regarding money, friends, in-laws, career goals, recreation, leisure activities, sex and parenting? What about your cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds? How compatible are they? Then again, how similar are your personalities? Are you a Type A personality, and he’s a Type B personality? Do you like to argue passionately, and she’s an avoider who doesn’t like conflict? Is he an introvert, and are you an extravert? The extent to which two people are compatible is very important to the well-being of your relationship today and into the future. So, while you’re getting to know your partner, don’t be shy about asking questions related to these and other important concerns.

By the way, you might be interested to know that several excellent premarital preparation inventories exist that can help you understand the extent to which you and your partner are compatible. If you’re interested in more information about these inventories, you might E-mail me at joanidesch@aol.com, consult your priest and/or a marriage friendly couple’s therapist who specializes in premarital preparation. The results should prove very helpful in your efforts to assess your compatibility quotient.

COMPLEMENTARITY

Many couples spend time trying to determine how compatible they are, but few spend an equal amount of time trying to determine how different they are. This last statement might confuse you, but I have found that couples who spend time trying to determine the extent to which they are similar, should also spend more time trying to understand their differences – especially with regard to some big issues such as, money, friends, in-laws, career goals, arguing styles, recreation, leisure time, sex, parenting, ethnic and religious backgrounds and personality differences.

Unfortunately, I have also met my share of these kinds of couples. They got married without looking carefully at some of their big differences, thinking it would be easier to simply get married and figure life out after marriage. But research suggests that that’s not the most effective way to cultivate marital satisfaction. Here’s an example of a couple who benefited from examining their big differences more carefully. And while the outcome was hard for them to face, both agreed their decision was for the best.

A few months back, the following couple called me for a second opinion. He was Greek Orthodox and she was Moslem. According to both partners, they were both “deeply in love with one another.” They both also felt that their love could help them overcome their cultural and religious differences, this despite the fact that both had a high connection to their backgrounds. However, as I respectfully probed and perturbed them with questions, it eventually became apparent to both partners that the differences they shared were so great that it was impossible for them to bridge them. As a result, they decided to end their relationship as friends, rather than postpone an inevitable breakup that would simply get more difficult. Both left this meeting visibly distressed. However, a few months later, he called and informed me that they were both still smarting, but they also believed they had made the correct decision.

In the above example, this couple was able to respectfully and bravely face their big differences and make some prayerful, healthy decisions. But what if they had failed to do this? Well, my guess would be that this would have been a huge omission that both would have lived to regret.

So, spend some time examining how *different* you and your partner are on important matters like ethnicity, religion, sex, communication, arguing style, career goals, money, leisure time, in-laws, friends and personality. And if you discover that some big differences exist, slow the dating process down enough to permit both of you to consider these differences prayerfully and respectfully. This strategy will have a



decidedly positive impact on your future well-being. And if it’s God’s will that you marry, this strategy will also have made a positive impact on your future marriage. Admittedly, this may be very difficult, especially if you’ve bonded emotionally with one another, and the hormones and the neuropeptides are flowing. But unless you’re honest with yourself, you may become a victim of the following old adage: “What love conceals, time will reveal.” What this means is that after the romance has worn off, and reality sets in after a few years, you may be in for a rude awakening unless you’ve both been honest about your differences and reached some mutually satisfying understandings prior to marriage.

AVOID COMPROMISING YOUR BELIEFS

You are what you believe. So, you shouldn’t compromise your core values. I have met far too many couples who compromised what they believed to please their partner, or extended family member, only to regret this decision after marriage. So, be honest with yourself, and don’t compromise your core values and belief system. For example, if getting married and raising your children in the Greek Orthodox Church is important to you, don’t compromise this personal need.

Those who have these needs, and fail to get on the same page with their dating partner, compromising what they desire and believe, almost always regret doing so. And worse than the regret are the residual feelings of anger and resentment which follow. These feelings usually end up poisoning marital satisfaction and family stability.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION, CULTURE, RACE AND CLASS

Closely related to this last suggestion, my research with inter-Christian and intercultural couples has shown me that many dating partners fail to consider the impact that religion, culture, race and class have on one’s core values. However, the bottom line is that these factors have a significant impact on the way we see the world. Therefore, if you have a high connection to your religious and/or cultural background, you and your dating partner should spend some extra time taking about your differences, similarities and future expectations regarding the type of marriage and family life you’d like to cultivate. This also applies to race and class. If you come from different racial and class backgrounds, these differences can often have strong influences on how you interpret the world. I remember a young lady recently making the following observation after I made of these exact points, “Father Charles, I thoroughly agree. We had a clear understanding before marriage. I wanted him to know that I couldn’t consider marriage with him unless he was willing to raise our children in the Greek Orthodox Church. Without this commitment, I just couldn’t have become more serious with him”

WHAT ARE YOUR DEFINITIONS OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE?

I’m afraid that members of the “X” Generation are less likely than previous generations to have a Christ-centered perspective of marriage, primarily because of the postmodern, post-Christian world in which they’ve been raised. So, if you desire to foster a Christ-centered marriage and family life, spend some quality time getting to know your dating partner’s perspective of marriage, family and divorce. If your dating partner’s perspective is sufficiently different than your own, you should prayerfully think long and hard about the consequences of marrying someone who has a different definition of marriage, family and divorce than your own. To do otherwise will likely position you to experience chronic disappointment and marital strife.

COHABITATION

The number of couples who are cohabiting has spiked dramatically over the past ten years. Today, over 50% of all couples who marry determine to cohabit first. When asked why, most will state that it’s a way for them to get to know their partner before



they actually make the commitment to marriage. But is this trial-run logic, sound logic, and an effective strategy?

Our Christian tradition cautions us to avoid this alluring pitfall. Moreover, research validates this counsel. Not only does the best research indicate this strategy doesn’t work, but when non-cohabiting couples who marry are compared with those who have lived together prior to marriage, non-cohabiting couples report higher levels of marital satisfaction and lower levels of divorce. This means that the trial-run logic that couples use to justify cohabitation is based on myth, and not reality. Instead, reality would mirror what Holy Tradition teaches, which counsels couples to wait until they’re married before living together.

SEX, LOVE AND MARRIAGE

These days, many singles view sex as a recreational activity. This perspective argues that sex can be enjoyed outside of a committed relationship, and is part and parcel of a single lifestyle. One of the catch phrases used by many singles these days who espouse this philosophy is “hooking up.”

I’ve counseled several single persons who were victims of this philosophy. While in theory this philosophy may seem attractive and sound, it not only runs counter to what Christian tradition teaches, and doesn’t work, it is another myth that causes lots of heartaches. Moreover, the reason this philosophy doesn’t work, is because it separates sex from love and marriage. But this simply can’t be done, because sex is always relational.

Try as many singles do to convince themselves that sex with someone means nothing, the reality is it always does mean something. The primary reason why this is true has something to do with what our Holy Tradition teaches – that we are psychosomatic beings, and our bodies and spirits cannot be compartmentalized. As such, sex and self are profoundly interconnected to one another when people are physically intimate.

In addition to what Holy Tradition teaches, results from numerous studies further validate the point that hooking up is anything but harmless. These studies suggest that the more sexual partners a person has before marriage negatively impacts their ability to remain in a committed, faithful relationship. That’s because what one believes has a great impact on one’s future decisions and behavior.

So, if you believe that sex, love and marriage are interconnected, with God’s help, struggle to live up to this belief. One way to do this is to pick dating partners who have similar values.

CHOOSE WISELY

In one of St. John Chrysostom’s homilies about marriage, he offers the following succinct counsel. “Choose wisely.” One way to do this is to permit God to be an active part of the dating process. God’s divine guidance and wisdom will help you avoid many of the pitfalls that are part and parcel of the territory of dating.

But let’s assume that you’re already collaborating with God during the dating process. Is this enough? From my perspective, I’d say, no. Why? Well, before answering this question, let me share a quote I recently read on a church’s marquee. It read as follows: If God is your copilot, swap places. I believe this is excellent advice for those of you who are looking for the love of your life, because this quote reminds you that it’s not simply enough to collaborate with God during the dating process, you should also be willing to allow Him to guide you.

I remember speaking to a group of college students and making this point. After my presentation, one young man came forward and thanked me, stating that he’d never quite understood what God’s role was until I shared this guideline. So, if God is your copilot, and you’re in collaboration with Him, but you still have most of the control, swap seats.

GETTING IT RIGHT THE SECOND TIME

People who’ve been divorced and are considering remarriage often encounter a host of additional challenges that are unlike the challenges that people encounter when marrying the first time. That’s one main reason why the divorce rate among this population of couples is significantly higher. With that stated, people considering remarriage should not only consider the above suggestions, but should also seek to understand some of the pitfalls that people encounter when they remarry. For example, some of these potential pitfalls are related to the challenges that stepfamilies and stepparents encounter. Others are related to the ex-spouse and how to deal with them. And still others are related to marriage after 50, and the unique challenges that couples face during this part of the life cycle.

Since those who are divorced and are considering remarriage do not want to experience the trails and tribulations connected to a failed marriage, it goes without saying that considerable prayer and care can prove very helpful during the dating process.

CONCLUSION

During the Sacrament of Marriage which is celebrated in the Orthodox Church, a Gospel reading from St. John’s Gospel (JN. 2:1-11) is read which recounts how Jesus turns water into wine. It seems to me that when one the spiritual lessons behind this miracle is related to marriage, it serves to remind us that a life in Christ, and by extension, the grace of God that comes into people’s lives when Christ is in our midst, can help couples transform a stale marriage into an exciting vital marriage. In addition, a life in Christ, can turn defeat into victory; anguish and frustration into healing; resentment into understanding; unhappiness into contentment, and irreconcilable differences into an opportunity for growth and the increased oneness that our Lord referred to when he stated: “...a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (MT 19:5).

Yet, as absolutely crucial and central as God’s grace is to marriages, I always remind young people who are looking for the love of their life that our theology also reminds us that our part in the salvation process is absolutely necessary. So, don’t shrink from this responsibility. Take the time to get to know yourself and your partner, and with God’s direction and help, choose wisely. Amen.

Should you have other questions or concerns after reviewing the information that follows, please don’t hesitate to Email me at joanidesch@aol.com. You might also log onto the Interfaith Marriage Web site for additional assistance. The address of this site is www.interfaith.goarch.org.

INTERFAITH WEB SITE
www.Interfaith.goarch.org

OUTREACH & EVANGELISM WEB SITE
www.Outreach.goarch.org



LOOKING for the LOVE OF YOUR LIFE

Dating Tips That Lead to Good Choices



Icon by the hand of Athanasios Clark

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