

# RUSTY AT ROMANCE: UNSOLICITED ADVICE ON MID-LIFE DATING

## **Married 35 Plus Years**

Carole and I have been married for more than 35 years! How can someone who has been so out-of-the-'market' have anything interesting to say about dating and mid-life?

I guess that you will have to answer the question yourself; hopefully, once you have read what I have written. The reason for putting pen to paper on this topic is that I have seen many men and women who are desiring of living their lives faithfully and fully, are beginning to date (again) and are rusty at romance.

## **Risking Singleness**

There are some people who don't have any need or desire to get married. This is perfectly OK, and those who are single shouldn't feel that there is any reason that they have to be married.

But if you wonder whether you are called to be a single, because you aren't married, and yet you find yourself being lonely for a mate, then the answer is probably 'No'! However, some people think that they are called to be single, when in reality they have just given up on dating and risking intimacy. The greater problem, in my experience, is those faithful people who desire marriage but, so far, their goal has eluded them.

## **Will You Serve God Even If You Never Marry?**

This is an issue that Christian singles face. The easy and quick-to-the-lips answer is 'Yes, I will whatever the cost.' It's easy to say this if you have the underlying thought of '...assuming that He makes me happy without a husband / wife.' The Bible proclaims that it is a privilege to be single and there are many advantages to it.

For myself, I have come to the realization that I could never be really fulfilled without a wife (and, to be clear, my wife Carole). But I can also say, 'I will still serve God, even if I'm not

happy.’ This is a reality for marrieds as well as those who are not-yet-married. There is no guarantee happiness in marriage; neither is there an assurance of being un-lonely while being married.

### **Cleaning Up Your Act**

Sometimes the reason that you are still single, is some wrongdoing (that has been done to you or you have done to others) or some complicated hurt that rises to the surface in your life. If this is true for you, these issues should be addressed before you marry. If you are heavy into pornography, talk to your minister or counsellor who will help you desensitize your sexual response. If you hang around with prostitutes, stop it! If you find yourself hating those of the other sex, some get psychological counselling. (Counselling is extremely helpful in sexual matters. I recommend that you find a qualified therapist who will listen, understand and intervene without judgment. I know that sexual issues seem very personal to you. But it is the ‘truck and trade’ of marital counsellors.) If you are alcoholic or otherwise addicted, get help! Do you find yourself destroying relationships before they have a chance? Get some wise counsel! Don't think that you have to be perfect to get married, but there may be specific blocks to a healthy relationship that you can overcome.

### **Sex (As In Intercourse)**

If your pattern is to have sex with many that you meet, you will damage your future marriage. Previous sexual experience does not lead to a better sexual life in marriage. All it really does do (apart from possibly being fun for the time) is potentiate for relational damage prior to marriage and pattern you for extramarital relationships while married. And it is so discouraging for so many to prove to yourself that you (and your friend) cannot control your urges. I cannot say that I have met a mature man or woman who is proud of his or her sexual experience prior to marriage, though I have met many who feel that something was taken from them when they slept with others. It is true -- when you give yourself outside of marriage, you give part of yourself away that you cannot take back.

Another thing that non-marital sex does is to prematurely bond you together in an agreement that you have not yet made. What this means is that you might become emotionally and spiritually tied to that person, outside of your own will. You may decide to ‘call it off,’ and find it almost impossible to do.

There is also the issue of ‘how far can we go?’ as if anybody can tell you exactly or as if anybody should. Rather than give you some specific universal rule about your physical boundaries, I will recommend that you ask yourself this question: ‘Is this sexual activity an

expression of devotion to God and affection for the other?' You might find out that it fore-play with no follow-through.

### **What Is A Date And What Is It For?**

If you asked different people what a date is, you would probably get a bunch of different answers - usually very emotionally packed answers! In order to establish some common ground, I am somewhat arbitrarily defining what I consider a date to be: 'a date is a pre-planned encounter with someone sex in order to appreciate them and to discover whether a romantic/spiritual relationship might arise.' This does not mean that a date shouldn't be fun, or that you have to make some kind of covenant-making decision on the first date. It does mean, however, that there are no necessary commitments other than treating the other with respect and friendship affection.

Going out on a date does not mean that you are in love. Going out on the second date should not mean that you are in love. Going out on the third date does not mean that you are in love. It does mean that you are wondering.

What if you have decided that you no longer wonder and you know it is 'no.' Well, I don't think that you should go out 'just for fun' without telling him or her where you are at. Yes, there are people who get married without ever going out on a 'date,' but typically they were in situations where they had a chance to get alone together to talk. This is crucial to the relationship.

I think that first dates are for 'orientation'; that is, wondering if you are oriented to each other. I think that second and third dates are for 'communication' of ideas and feelings. Following dates are for exploring whether you can make a covenant with each other. Obviously, I am not a big believer in mature people dating for extended periods of time.

### **The Stages Of Courtship**

One mistake people sometimes make is the idea (sometimes unconscious) that they can jump from being total strangers to the shared nightly ritual of brushing teeth in one emotional cataclysm. This is really bad news. Relationships must go through stages of commitment. Here is a 'courtship continuum of commitment' that might be helpful to consider.

(1) Contract ---- (2) Commitment ---- (3) Covenant

A **contract** is based on some quid pro quo ('I bought you dinner at Earl's. You owe my some vulnerable conversation.') and is the most superficial. A **commitment** has a feeling base to it (and always feels genuine). **Covenant** has to do with inviting God's real presence into your

relational life. Covenant leads to and includes marriage and is therefore the deepest kind of commitment.

The issue is not so much how fast you progress through these stages, but that you go through them stage by stage.

The first stage is the initial date: at this point there is no commitment whatsoever; you are just getting to know each other. The second stage is dating; there is still no actual commitment, but there is some obvious interest. The third stage is what we used to call 'going steady'; here there is an agreement to continue seeing each other and to not see anyone else romantically. The fourth stage is engagement to covenant -- that is, moving towards marriage.

I'm sure many couples' courtship won't match these stages exactly, but it is important that you give each other the opportunity to develop commitment rather than just invent it. It is also vital for you to respect the speed of advancement that the other person desires (if they are 'slower' than you).

Note: at any time before the wedding, it is legitimate to back off. Of course, the closer you get, the more people will get upset but it is much better to handle this upset than to live upset throughout your married life. It is important to know that you have this withdrawal option and that you don't need an excuse!

### **Pre-Marital Mentoring**

As many of you know, I am a clergyman as well as being a psychologist and I won't marry anyone who has not had premarital counselling or mentoring (and I do not mean premarital group discussion, 'we spent time with the pastor' type counselling, discussion weekend retreats, etc.). I mean face-to-face with a professional counsellor or (better and cheaper yet) trained premarital couple mentors who will invest 8 - 10 evenings with you in couple-to-couple privacy.

Some will say, 'This is just for kids who are getting married.' Or, 'I've been married before (lived together).'

Let me be clear -- your previous sexual history is bad preparation for a marriage covenant. Living together is poor preparation for a marriage covenant. Divorce is not a helpful way to prepare for a marriage covenant. Counselling helps weed through your histories (not just inform you as books might do) and helps you merge your histories. It is also a context in which you can forgive yourself and one another.

## **Falling In Love With Someone That You Don't Know**

This is a terrifically bad idea. It is also not love! 'But wait a second here, I have very deep feelings for this person and you are telling me that I'm not in love?' No, I am telling you that it is not love. It is 'falling into an intense emotional love-like state called 'limerence.' Limerence is a physiological, glandular decompensation of your natural defenses (I'm not just making this up: there are certain hormonal, chemical changes that occur when you feel 'in love'). But no matter how wonderful it feels, it is not a relationship. Also, if you don't know him or her well, the person you think that you are in love with is a fantasy person in your mind, not a real nose-blowing, reality-TV-watching human being.

I think many people take their own emotions much too seriously in terms of marital decision making. If you have 'decompensated in love' with someone that you really don't have a relationship with, it is a one-sided infatuation that has nothing to do with finding a life-long covenant partner. Does this sound cynical? This isn't cynical: this is real.

'Falling in love' has nothing to do with conflict resolution, or compatibility, or God's will, or child rearing, or any planning for future happiness. It is just an emotional state (albeit, a really great one!). Does it have a place in romantic relationships? Of course it does. But that's the point, it has a place in romantic relationships that leads to covenant. It is not a covenant in and of itself.

Now this experience is real in mid-life as well as the 20s. Many mid-life men fall into limerence with younger women -- they feel better appreciated, understood and somehow more powerful. But this is not love. It is limerence. For some in mid-life it is harder to get 'swept up' especially if you are a single parent paying a mortgage on a 'Vancouver special.' But it happens and you should be aware of it. Also -- not having limerence does not mean that you don't have what it takes for mature romance. (If this is all a bit confusing, you should probably speak to your pastor or a therapist.)

So, why does this happen, and what can you do? It usually happens in your thought life. 'Falling in love' is directly connected to your fantasy-romance thought life. If you want to fall in limerence with someone, keep thinking about him or her (especially sexually, but imagining him as your live-in dad for your kids does this as well). If you don't want to be in limerence, cultivate singleness in your thought life. If you have already decompensated, the best thing you could do is just forget dating at all -- you will probably be out of control on the first date. Even if you perform 'virginally,' you are most likely to be so self-absorbed with your emotions and yourself that you will be unable to relate to the other except as extensions of your own wishes.

## **A Giver Or A Taker: Inner Strength**

This is an important but sometimes subtle aspect of the dating relationship. Going into a dating friendship with the attitude of getting your own needs met just doesn't cut it. People are pretty intuitive about this. They want you to be responsive to them, not just out on your own agenda.

You can get caught in a vicious cycle: you get rejected, this amplifies your need, in the next relationship your need keeps you from relating well, and you get rejected again. And the cycle recycles ('its deja vu all over again'). It takes a lot of resiliency and wisdom to break a vicious cycle. It takes a commitment to the other as a person beyond your wish fulfillment, even if nothing romantic happens. Are you willing to be a faithful friend? It takes getting your eyes off of yourself for a while.

There is a difficult point here for those of you that are God-followers. As you face your own needs and fears, you must come to terms with them before God. You must believe that God will see you through, regardless of whether this person of your hopes rebuffs you. You must realize that God will meet your needs through a human channel, but that channel may not be this particular person.

## **It's Your Decision!**

After you have started dating, and a relationship seems to be happening, the question inevitably comes up: Is this the one? This is a difficult decision, and there is some controversy about it! Some feel that there is just one mate for them in the entire world, and that they must search for that one. Others are waiting for God to COMMAND them to marry someone. Many think that their deep emotions are a sure sign that this relationship is 'God's will.' Still others will take the first one that comes along.

I don't think that any of these ideas are right! I think that you should seek God for guidance in choosing a mate and I think that seeking advice from friends and counsellors is helpful as well. Ultimately the decision is yours (and the other person's too, of course). You must feel that you are making this decision of your own free will, or else later on in the marriage during a difficult time, you may blame God for your troubles and want to 'bail out.' Take responsibility for your own commitments. Before the point that you say 'I do,' you have the whole world of possibilities before you. After that point, there was only one person for you from the foundations of the Earth. Something of a paradox isn't it? The time before the wedding is the last time that you can be so self-centered, and it is right to ask yourself 'Is this in my own best interests?' You should make this decision based on what is right for you, without consideration of what is best for him/her (I told you it was self-centered). You are

going to have to live with this decision for the rest of your life! It's a tough choice, but YOU have to make it.

### **Throw Away Your 'Shopping List'**

There are a lot of people who have a long 'shopping list' of features that they want in a spouse (or a car) and will not accept anyone who does not meet these requirements. This is grossly unfair: people are not consumer items. Each person is a unique individual with their own personality, needs, graces, strengths and weaknesses. It is the precise combination of strengths and weaknesses that makes a unique personality and a precise fit for your uniqueness. Coming up with a list of requirements and expecting your friend to meet them is not faith, it is presumption ('a six pack stomach, with a house on the waterfront, and earns more than a dentist'). As you get to know a person, don't ask whether they are on your list, but whether you are willing to be committed in covenant with this person. I don't mean that you should close your eyes to their faults, and just marry anyone, but start off with an unclosed and wondering mind, and make your decision after you understand them and appreciate them. God knows your needs better than you do, and you may find that there is someone who meets your needs perfectly that doesn't fill a single one of your so-called requirements. I should point out here that there are some minimal prerequisites: human, the other sex, single ('just about divorced' does not count), and likes you (that would help). I also think you should marry someone of the same faith, but that probably is another discussion.

If you need to consider a list of attributes for your future partner (and I have not convinced you yet) consider this Biblical list: 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law' (Gal.5:22-23). Pretty good marital qualities -- in you!

### **You Don't Marry Your Sibling**

You may have often heard the advice: 'get to know her / him as a friend, and see what happens.' Pretty good advice, I think (and this was true for Carole and me). Mutual respect is a great foundation for affection. In fact, respect has the effect of increasing affection and refining sexual passion. It is essential to marital excellence.

What it does not mean is that you develop a kind of 'just one of the buds' kind of relationship. I've known men who have had buddy-buddy relationships with women while complaining of how lonely they are and how desperate they are for a wife. I have asked, 'What about your friend? You get along great together and she seems to care for you.' But the clod just couldn't see himself in a romantic relationship with her. I personally think that

the reason for this is that we have instincts to keep us from incest with our siblings, and if we develop a strong brother-sister relationship it turns off our romantic interests. Note that I am not saying that these relationships are wrong, just don't expect them to grow into a romance. On the other hand, if you have such a relationship, you might consider re-evaluating it in terms of romance. (If you think that is confusing -- read on!)

### **Personal Appearance**

Aside from the basic principles of being neat, clean, and well groomed, there has been an over emphasis on 'looks.' Men often say that they are looking for a really beautiful woman; I have heard women wish that they were dating a 'George Clooney' (or whatever the equivalent is) kind of man. I think that most people who say this aren't really prepared to enter into a covenant. Ask yourself this: 'does physical magnificence have much to do with a happy household, a joyful spirituality, terrific growing kids or fantastic sex?'

By the way, being terrific looking doesn't make you more likely to get married or more likely to be married well; it just widens your field somewhat. The point here is whether you are willing to accept someone in your 'range' of looks. People often end up hating their own defects (weight, skin, height, feet, etc.) so much that they cannot accept anyone else with the same defects. Accept yourself. It helps in accepting others.

I like what Romans 12 says about this -'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.' Don't look to the shopping mall's standards to measure your outward appearance.

### **Waiting For Lightning To Strike Or Actively Seeking?**

One of the things that I believe has hindered many people from finding their mates is the idea that if they just follow God, or read the Bible or go to church, well then, marriage will 'just happen.' This is not biblical. This is dumb. Oh yes, I know of the scripture: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.' This is, of course, a pretty neat truth; but remember that it applies just as much to our entire lives, not just finding a mate.

Consider the 'thing' of being employed: You would not just sit at home by the telephone waiting for some employer to happen to pick your name out of the phone book. No, you ask God for help and direction, send out your resumes, and go to interviews. The reason that we tend to do this in dating, is fear; the fear of being hurt again by a relationship that 'didn't make it.' (If your fears are based upon wounds of date-rape, obscene phone calls or other

abuse, seek help.) So, we throw out 'fleeces' and try to make God jump through hoops so that we can be sure that this is 'the real thing.' Sometimes we are just believing what we were told by our youth pastors when we were in our teens. When you were a teenager, 'Don't worry about it' and 'Just wait' was good advice. You had plenty of time, but as you grow older, you find that concept wearing a little thin.

So what is the answer? In biblical times, most marriages were arranged by the parents. We don't usually have this system in Vancouver (where I am writing from), so I believe the answer is: be normal for this culture, and that means dating. And to men, that means asking women out on dates. And it might mean for women to ask men out. Or at the very least to consider Christian Café or eHarmony.

### **No Pain, No Gain**

Nobody likes pain, but all relationships (not just male-female relationships) involve the risk of pain. However, the dating relationships involve a very high risk of pain. If you want a life partner, you must be willing to accept this fact and take the risk. After being dumped, go through your grieving process, pick yourself up, and get on with life.

Here are some pointers about being rejected for both men and women: (1) If you ask 4 people out on a date, and only 1 goes out with you, you are doing pretty good. If one out of 10 relationships work out, you are also doing pretty well (of course then you don't care any more, because you're married). (2) If the man or woman has an excuse for not going on a date with you ('I have to wash my cat...'), but does not make a specific offer to go out another time (next week, the 3rd of July, 'sometime' doesn't count), then assume that he or she is not interested. (3) Give her or him time to decide -- it might take some time to figure out if you are interesting or not. (4) Keep on going. Don't mope around complaining about what you can't have, seek for what is in front of you. (5) Respect a person's right to say 'No' (and also to later reconsider).

### **Faith, Hope, Love**

As you go through the process of finding your partner these are good things to keep in mind. **Faith**, because it is the driving power behind your life. Not a passive faith that God will someday toss a mate in your lap, but an active, powerful faith that God is with you as you walk forward in your life. **Hope**, because you need the daily anticipation that God is working with you in all things for your good. **Love**, because without the the love of God you will not be able to take your eyes off of your own needs long enough to form a relationship.

### **Covenant**

I have said above that covenant is bigger than commitment (which is based on feeling) and bigger than contract (which is based on a fair exchange). Covenant has to do with God's power transforming both man and woman into one. Here are a few more of my ideas about covenant based on the traditional marriage vows.

- 'I take you...' is the activity of a freely disposed individual who entrusts himself/ herself to another. It is never coerced.

- 'To be...' speaks of the transition from one state of being into another. Marriage is not a role change as it is a transfiguration. One is transfigured from a man into being a husband. He is identifiable as a man while being a husband, but no longer is he only a man as she is no longer simply a woman.

- 'My lawfully wedded wife/husband...' speaks of the community aspect of marriage. It is accepted and affirmed as the good for all society and is the covenantal hope of the community for the future.

- 'To have...' speaks of the delight of the marital covenant. To have is to be thrilled with the reality that now the spouse has what he/she has waited for.

- 'And to hold...' speaks of the permanence of the 'having' and the personal responsibility that it is to hold what one has been given. It speaks against coveting and it introduces the idea of cherishing.

- 'To love...' emphasizes the emotion (eros) and the motivation (agape) of the covenant.

- 'And to cherish...' speaks of the attitude of prizing what it is that the covenant permits.

- 'For better, for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health...' is a reality statement of normal marriage. There will be many highs and lows and the covenant is sufficient for all of them.

- 'Until death do us part...' reminds the couple of the eternity of the covenant. It emphasizes the security of the commitment made.

- 'According to God's holy ordinance...' speaks of the Who that enacts and empowers the covenant. It is God's ordinance because it is God who 'holds the paper' and it is He that affirms the covenant.

## **Compatibility**

Sure, go out with others who like what you like and do what you do. Compatibility is a good thing but it is not everything. Compatibility can lead to over-closeness, being more like

brothers / sisters than other-sex friends, and eventually to boredom. Anyway, you will never find someone who is perfectly compatible, just compatible in some areas and entirely different in others. And compatibility is not a Biblical criteria for marriage, though it is still good to be compatible about much. This is the whole issue of 'equal yoking' from another perspective.

### **That's It!**

That is all I really wanted to say. I hope that it is helpful to you and that it promotes some thoughtfulness. I hope that you will use this document as an excuse to disagree with me about some of what I have said so that we can discuss you and your dating. Thanks for reading!