

ANDY STANLEY

THE NEW RULES FOR

LOVE
SEX &
DATING



ZONDERVAN

The New Rules for Love, Sex, and Dating

Copyright © 2014 by Andy Stanley

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stanley, Andy.

The new rules for love, sex, and dating / Andy Stanley. — 1st [edition].

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-310-34219-9 (softcover)

1. Sex—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Dating (Social customs)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Love—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BT708.S825 2015

241'.664—dc23

2014040217

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from *The Holy Bible, King James Version*.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by the author or Zondervan, nor does the author or Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover photography: © MaxyM / Shutterstock®

Interior design: Beth Shagene

First Printing November 2014 / Printed in the United States of America

*To my friends from 4th and Peachtree
who carried their HFITFC
all the way to the altar.*

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	9
<i>Introduction</i>	11
CHAPTER 1	
The Right Person Myth	21
CHAPTER 2	
Commitment Is Overrated	35
CHAPTER 3	
Becoming the Right Person	47
CHAPTER 4	
So Becoming	57
CHAPTER 5	
Love Is	73
CHAPTER 6	
The Gentleman's Club	101
CHAPTER 7	
The Way Forward	117
CHAPTER 8	
The Talk	131

CHAPTER 9

Designer Sex	151
------------------------	-----

CHAPTER 10

If I Were You	169
-------------------------	-----

<i>Conclusion</i>	183
-----------------------------	-----

<i>Notes.</i>	186
-----------------------	-----

<i>Small Group Video Discussion Guide</i>	187
---	-----

INTRODUCTION

I have three children, two boys and a girl. They're all in college. If you're reading this book three or more years after the original publication date, I hope they're out by now. But as of this afternoon, they're all tucked away in a library studying their hearts out. I hope.

When my sons got to the magic age when traditional fathers have the traditional *talk*, I informed them we were going to handle the situation a bit differently. Instead of an awkward fifteen-*minute* talk, we were going to begin an awkward fifteen-*year* conversation. And we did. Why this approach? Well, most boys are introduced to the topic of sex before they are actually interested in sex. By the time they're actually interested in sex, they've forgotten all those fascinating insights their fathers shared. Every year or two requires some review and something new. So I did my best to keep the conversation alive and current.

It's still a bit awkward at times. But we make eye contact now. I assured them early on that transparency in matters related to love, sex, and dating wouldn't land them in

“time out” or worse. Everybody struggles. Everybody faces similar temptations. Everybody has regrets. So as we begin this awkward journey together, I thought it might be helpful to begin with some of the stuff my grown-up children and I talk about. Stuff we’ve all observed. For example, we live in a highly sexualized culture. Images in contemporary advertisements are more graphic than previous generations’ pornography. Sex is leveraged to sell just about everything. Actually, the promise of *no-strings-attached sex* with a *way-above-average-looking person* is used to sell just about everything. Sexual scandals among politicians, athletes, and celebrities elicit yawns. Infidelity is woven into the plot of just about every form of entertainment that involves a plot.

Nothing new there. But it does remind me of one of my finer parenting moments.

When Andrew, our oldest, was in ninth grade, everybody was watching *The Office*. Everybody. No freshmen dared show their faces at Milton High School if they were not conversant with the previous evening’s episode. You think I’m exaggerating. On many occasions, Andrew got up an hour early to watch the show before school because his unreasonable parents made him study instead of watching television the night before. We were so hard core.

Like most everything on television, *The Office* was laced with sexual innuendo. Sometimes more lace than innuendo. This bothered his mother and me. We wrestled with the issue of age-appropriate entertainment. Andrew assured me on multiple occasions that *The Office* was clean and I didn’t need to worry. So I decided to use *The Office* to introduce

and hopefully sensitize Andrew to the sexual subtleties of prime-time television.

I handed him a pen and a 3" x 5" card and told him I wanted him to watch one episode sitting beside his mom and to make a slash mark for every sexual reference. He agreed. Silly parents.

I walked in a few minutes after the show started. They were still flashing up the opening credits. Andrew already had five marks on his card. Sandra gave me that, “Seriously, we’re letting our son watch this?” look. Andrew was horrified. “Dad, it’s never like this. I promise. Does Mom really have to sit here the whole time?”

The Flip Side

The reason I bother to mention our march toward the sexualization of everything is that it stands in stark contrast to a second cultural current of which we’re all aware. One that’s been around since the beginning of time. Namely, a deep appreciation of and desire for good ol’ fashioned, stand-the-test-of-time love. *And they lived happily ever after* isn’t a line used much anymore, but it could certainly be tacked on to just about every chick flick. Isn’t that what makes a chick flick a chick flick? Add to that the plethora of online matchmaking services, along with a growing list of reality TV shows built around helping individuals navigate their relational options. So while we are a culture enamored with the idea of unencumbered, consequence-free sex, we can’t

seem to abandon our infatuation with long-term relational exclusivity either.

What's a girl to do?

At this juncture you might expect me to lay the blame for our cultural duplicity at the feet of your favorite actress, recording artist, and everybody else on the West Coast, who many believe are responsible for creating our sex-crazed culture. But I'm not that guy and this isn't that book. I'm not all that interested in *why* things are the way they are. I'm more interested in helping you navigate the way things are. My purpose in writing is to increase your relational satisfaction quota. Because sex is usually part of long-term relationships, we're going to talk about sex. But we're going to talk about it within a larger context than a single relationship or a single event. As much as culture tries to separate our sexual experiences from the rest of our lives, it can't be done.

I bet you already knew that.

Perhaps you've already tried that.

We're going to talk about love. We're going to explore what it means to love someone and what it takes for someone to love us back. We're going to explore love that includes, but goes beyond, chemistry. Along the way I hope to restore your belief that marriage can last a lifetime.

Some of what I have to say will be painful. Some of it you won't believe. You'll be tempted to close your book (or return to the home screen of your mobile device). I'm going to challenge some assumptions. I'm going to remind you of some unwise choices and bad decisions. Though my intent is neither to judge nor condemn you, you may feel both before

we're finished. As negative as all that sounds, by the end of the first chapter I believe you'll believe I have your best interest at heart. I want something *for* you, not *from* you. Relationally speaking, I want for you what you want for you. Namely, *more*. As you've discovered, our highly sexualized culture does not deliver on its promise. It can't. Truth is, what our sexually liberated culture offers is ultimately not all that liberating.

How do I know?

Confession Magnet

As you may know, I'm a pastor. Like most pastors, I'm somewhat of a walking conscience. Because of the size of our congregation I'm pretty well known in our community. People who've never met me feel like they know me. So it's common for folks to walk up to me at the mall or in a coffee shop and just start talking. Seriously, no introduction; they just start talking. Before they know it, they've opened the vaults of their souls and invited me to step inside. Actually, I don't have to step inside. They bring everything out and put it on display like a garage sale. Everything.

It usually begins with, "You're Andy, aren't you? Well, my wife ... my husband ... my marriage ... my boyfriend ... my girlfriend ... my past ..." They launch into personal, detailed stories with little or no filter. I'm thinking, *You shouldn't tell anybody this, much less your pastor, in public!*

But they do. In one unfiltered purge. Then I go home and share their stories with my kids. Experience is a brutal

teacher. I figure my kids should learn all they can from other people's experience.

When I can, I stop them and say, "Okay, hold on one second; perhaps we should start with a name." And those are the face-to-face encounters. You should read my mail and email. Fine print. Single-spaced. Pages and pages. Lurid details. Extraordinary pain and regret. In the majority of cases there is a sexual/relational component. As I listen or read, I think,

Really?

Didn't you see that coming?

Didn't you know that ...?

Did no one ever tell you that ...?

Did your momma never sit you down and explain that if you ...?

Don't you understand how men think?

Don't you know what women need?

Don't you understand the way life is?

After years of this I've concluded that for most people the answer is no to most of those questions. Nobody told 'em. Nobody warned 'em. Nobody taught 'em. For whatever reason, Mom and Dad skipped some really important information. They had the *talk* and then went back to *Dancing with the Stars*.

So, while I don't have all the answers, I have *some* answers. And while I won't fill your cup in the pages that follow, I intend to empty mine. I'll do my best to address as many of the aforementioned "Didn't you know?" questions I can.

For the sake of full disclosure, you should know I'm not

a psychologist. I don't hold a PhD in anything. Not only am I not a doctor, I didn't even make nurse. So other than my retail, coffee shop, and hallway confessions, what qualifies me to delve into your personal life? Nothing really. I'm not writing because I'm *qualified*. I'm writing because I'm *concerned*. I'm not a licensed counselor. Counselors are required to listen. I'm not that patient. Besides, the way I see it, there are only three or four life narratives. Once I've identified which one an individual has opted for or fallen into, I'm ready to start dispensing advice. People don't like it when I interrupt their stories before they're finished. Know why? They think their stories are original. Unique. Chances are, so do you.

So let me go ahead and burst the first of many bubbles. While it's true that you're a one-of-a-kind person, your story is not a one-of-a-kind story; it's original to you, but it's not original. And that's a good thing. The fact that your story isn't original is what makes it possible for someone like me to offer advice and suggest a new approach. If you embrace the myths that *your* story is a story unto itself, that *your* experience is unique to you, and that *your* love life is like no one else's, then you will find it easy to dismiss everything I'm about to suggest. You'll see yourself as the exception to every *rule*. While it's true that you're *exceptional*, you are not an *exception*. It's this disturbing discovery that moves the fifty-plus crowd in our churches to cheer me on whenever I address this topic. They've lived long enough to recognize just how unexceptional we all really are.

I've been married twenty-seven years—to the same

person. That says more about Sandra than it does about me. My parents divorced after thirty-something years of a less-than-ideal marriage. Most couples would have given up way sooner. Sandra's parents seem to be as in love as the day they met. So I've seen a lot. Good and bad. I've learned a lot. I've been teaching the principles I'm about to share with you long enough to see results. I've received hundreds, maybe thousands, of letters, emails, and texts from people who say they wish they'd heard what I'm about to share with you when they were in their twenties; before their first marriage; before they reached for the divorce lever. Whenever I share this content, the response is overwhelming. The group that cheers me on with the most enthusiasm is parents. They want their dating-age kids to avoid the mistakes they made. They hope their kids will get it right the first time. I can't tell you how many parents of preschoolers and elementary-aged kids have purchased audio and video versions of this material to save for their children when they are old enough to need it.

So whether you're *still* in or *back* in a season of looking for the love of your life, I can help. If you're living with someone in an attempt to discover whether he or she is the right choice of a lifetime companion, this content will help. If you've given up on love or if you've never seen a marriage you would be caught dead in, this content may very well restore your hope. If you've concluded, "All guys are the same," and "Women only care about how much a guy makes," keep reading.

However, if you're a recreational or serial dater, if you're a *player*, if you're recently divorced and plan to spend the

next few years living your adolescent dreams, you may have wasted your money or somebody else's. For that, there's eBay. Or, just put this on a shelf for the time being. You may want to dust it off at a later date.

Looking Ahead

One thing that makes this topic a bit tricky is that sex and our sexuality are a bit like fire. Fire in its proper context is very appealing. Out of its proper context, it's extremely destructive. The same is true for all things sexual. If you've never been married or are under thirty, even if you've lived with someone, you underestimate the complexity of your sexuality and the long-term ramifications of your sexual conduct. You don't underestimate because you aren't smart. You underestimate because of your birthday and life experience—two things you have little or no control over. So it's not your fault. One thing I hope to do during our pages together is to reframe the subject of sex in such a way that you see it for what it is. Suffice it to say, "it" is both wonderful and powerful. The wonderful part makes it worth pursuing. The powerful part makes it worth respecting. It's a lack of respect for one's sexuality that sets up a lot of the thirty-and-older crowd for unintended confusion and relational chaos.

More on that later.

Future Perfect

I'm hoping our time together will empower you to avoid what I know you would love to avoid. In most contexts, information is power. The arena of love, sex, and dating is no exception. If you've never been married, you get to get it right the first time. If you are single again, perhaps the following pages will empower you to keep the painful aspects of your history from repeating themselves. The present, what you're doing right now, will eventually be part of your past. The past, especially your relational past, has a pesky way of showing up at the most inopportune times in your future. I've met with many struggling married couples who would describe themselves as having "marriage problems." But in all my years I've never talked to a married couple that actually had a *marriage* problem. What I've discovered is that people with problems get married and their problems collide. What was manageable as a single person eventually becomes unmanageable within the context of marriage. Marriage problems are easy. They rarely require counseling. But when the premarriage past surfaces in a marriage, that's another story. That dynamic is one of the primary reasons I wrote this book. There's enough unavoidable pain in life. I want to help you avoid the avoidable pain. Namely, pain you will experience later because of decisions you are making right now.

Here we go.

THE RIGHT PERSON MYTH

At the center of every great love story are two people who are *right* for each other, destined to be together. We're usually able to spot 'em three or four scenes into a movie or a half-dozen chapters into a novel. You just know. Usually before they do. Three hundred pages or a hundred and twenty minutes later they've figured out what we knew all along, leaving us entertained and, in some cases, inspired by their story.

Then there's *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. In the case of these two reality TV shows, we don't know who's *right* for whom until the end. We think we do. That's what makes it so entertaining. But in the end, regardless of how many potential *right* candidates there are, one and only one is chosen. The *right* one.

Hopefully.

I say "hopefully" because every hardcore *B'* and *B'tte* fan scans the Internet for weeks following that final episode to

see who was *right* after all. As of the writing of this book, it appears that five contestants chose well. The others? They moved on to the next *right* person.

I realize that you realize movies, reality TV, and novels don't reflect real life. I assume you don't take your relationship cues from script writers and authors. But it's possible you've embraced the underlying premise that holds these story lines and episodes together. That assumption being: *there's a right person for you, and once you find your right person, everything will be all right.*

I call this The Right Person Myth.

The myth isn't, *There's a right person for you out there somewhere.* There may very well be. The myth is that once you find the right person, everything will be all right. My hunch is you're smart enough to know why that's a myth. The current divorce rate pretty much says it all.¹ Consider this. Every man and woman who have navigated the pain and complexity of divorce stood in front of a preacher, priest, or justice of the peace and made vows to the *right* person. Every single one. But eventually they discovered something wrong with Mr. or Miss Right. Then there's this. A good many divorced men and women had already located right person 2.0 while in the process of divorcing right person 1.0. And the whole thing begins again.

You may not believe there's *one* right person for you, but you are looking for the *right* person. Aren't you? Of course you are. What option do you have? Go looking for the wrong person? No person? How 'bout an arranged marriage?

There's a thought. Who would your parents have *arranged* for you?

Looking for the right person is a great idea as long as you don't assume that finding the right person ensures everything will be all right. Looking for the right person is essential; it's just not enough. There's more to a satisfying relationship than finding the right person. As I mentioned in the introduction, *more* is what this book is all about. Problem is, we don't hear much about the *more* side of the relational equation. Understandably so. It doesn't make for great film or reality TV. However, it does make for great relationships. It's this undervalued side of the equation that keeps romance romantic. On a personal note, it's why I love going home at the end of the day. TMI.

Attraction Matters

Before we explore *more*, let's think together for just a paragraph or two about what makes a *right* person a *right* person. There are a number of factors, among them beauty, talent, confidence, intelligence, depth, wit, family, wealth, weight, height, career, and personality. Admit it, you have a list. Everybody has a list. Online dating services wouldn't work if people didn't have lists. But at the end of the day, our lists are not the deciding factors, are they? In the end it comes down to two things (actually maybe one thing, but for the sake of clarity I'll keep them separate): chemistry and attraction. At age fifteen, attraction is enough. But I doubt there are too many fifteen-year-olds reading this. While

most everybody has a mental list of what makes the *right person* the *right person*, most people abandon their lists for physical attraction and chemistry.

When you're physically attracted to someone *and* there's that extra something we will refer to as chemistry, it just feels right, doesn't it?

When it feels right, it's easy to assume it *is* right. And sometimes it is.

This explains why we've heard people say, "The first time we met, I knew we would be together." Somehow they just knew. They *knew* before they got to *know* each other. Strange. Strange but not uncommon. While instant chemistry is common, instant chemistry that dovetails into an instantly healthy relationship with until-death-do-us-part potential is not. Show me a couple who are attracted to each other and share that certain something, and I'll show you a couple convinced they are *right* for each other. So *right* that nothing could possibly go *wrong*. Right? Been there? We all have. But as I'm fond of saying, falling in love is easy; it requires a pulse. Staying in love requires *more*. There's that word again.

Since the title of this book promises SEX, I thought we should introduce the topic in this first chapter. But this isn't the sex talk. That's in chapter eight. If you can't wait, feel free to flip or swipe ahead . . . as long as you promise to come back and read the first seven chapters.

When a relationship feels *right*, it's a powerful thing. Deceptively powerful. It's no wonder that the *righter* a relationship feels, the *quicker* we are tempted to take things further. Why not? Physical attraction isn't like art apprecia-

tion. It's not something you admire from a distance. Physical attraction is like hunger. It's something you satisfy. It's part of the attraction—chemistry continuum. If a couple shares a passion for the same foods, music, and sports teams, it makes sense they need to find out if that passion extends to the bedroom. And what do you know? In the majority of cases, it does. While adding a dose of physical involvement into the mix makes a relationship more exciting and enjoyable, it also makes it more complicated. But for the most part, that doesn't stop us, which brings us to our first "doesn't everybody know that?" moment. This is where I state the obvious, with a preposition at the end.

Ready?

You are sexually compatible with far more people than you are relationally compatible with.

Not a single male reading this book will underline that statement. Of course our sexual compatibility outstrips our relational compatibility. By a long shot. Several million to one. Which means if you're sexually involved with someone right now, the next time the two of you are in the middle of lovemaking, look each other in the eye and say, "You are one *of* a million!" To which your partner will say (assuming he or she hasn't read this fascinating book), "Don't you mean, I'm one *in* a million?" To which you can say, "No, you're one *of* a million. I'm sexually compatible with a million other people. You're just one of 'em!"

Okay. Terrible idea.

This "tell me something I don't already know" insight underscores why experimenting sexually to ensure you've

found the *right person* is a bad idea. Sexual compatibility is important. Real important. But sexual compatibility is not the litmus test for relational compatibility. In fact, it's the other way around. Exhibit A: Why did your last relationship end? What happened? Did it have anything to do with sexual incompatibility? Losing interest in sex with someone isn't the same as being sexually incompatible. Losing interest in sex with someone is always a manifestation of something else. Something deeper. My hunch is the root of your previous relational challenges was . . . relational, not sexual. Chances are you would have addressed the relational challenges more quickly if you hadn't been physically involved. In fact, you would have ended the relationship sooner if you hadn't been sexually involved. Sex is a bit like glue. You shouldn't apply it until you're absolutely sure you're ready to stick two things together permanently. Apply it too soon, and you'll have a mess once you realize your mistake. I know, sounds like something your momma would say.

Not only is sex not the litmus test for relational compatibility, it actually inhibits and distracts from relational development. Why? Because sex has the capacity to camouflage an endless list of relational deficiencies and dysfunctions. Romance overpowers objectivity, which will work to your advantage in marriage. But before marriage, a lack of objectivity is dangerous. Sex distorts positive and negative traits in a partner. Men and women exaggerate the good and turn a blind eye to the things that would normally give them pause. Once a couple is physically involved, they overlook

and ignore characteristics and habits that would otherwise cause them to mark someone off their lists.

Now, if you can relate to the previous three paragraphs and you're wondering why you weren't smart enough to recognize what was happening when it was happening, I have a bit of encouraging news. It wasn't completely your fault. Your brain played a trick on you. For years researchers have studied the brain's response to a variety of external stimuli, including specific appetites.

Along the way they discovered a cognitive bias someone labeled *focalism*. Focalism is the brain's tendency to magnify one thing to the exclusion of everything else. Focalism distorts reality, be that reality food, a dress, a car, or, yes, a person. You've experienced focalism many times, and most instances were harmless. We've all driven miles out of our way to get a favorite dessert, fast food sandwich, or specialty coffee. We had to have *that* particular one. Nothing else would suffice. We've all made impulse purchases we later regretted. Similarly, we've tried our best to buy something, attend something, or contact someone that didn't work out. Twenty-four hours later, we were relieved that it didn't. Focalism, along with a short list of other cognitive biases, has the potential to trick us into making bad decisions. That potential increases dramatically in emotionally charged environments. And what's more emotionally charged than romance?

Romance is like a fog. Nobody sees clearly. Couples begin to believe no one has *ever* loved the way they love. Not their

mommas or their grandmommas. Not Romeo and Juliet. Not William and Kate. Not even Edward and Bella.

It's almost impossible to recognize any of this in the mirror. But you immediately recognize it in your friends, don't you? You've had friends introduce you to Mr. or Miss Right, and you thought, *Seriously? Really? Have you lost your mind?* They're thinking happily ever after and you're wondering if it's too late to say something. You know intuitively that they're as happy as they'll ever be. Once the sizzle subsides, somebody is going to wake up and wonder how he or she got into this mess. And you're not the only one who's noticed. Everybody sees it. Everybody but them.

Doesn't Make Him Right

The odds are in your favor. You will be sexually compatible with the *right* person. But sexual compatibility doesn't make someone *right*. If it did, things would sure be easier. That arranged marriage approach would work just about 100 percent of the time. Sex is easy. Relationships are not. To test the potential possibility of a long-term relationship via sex is a bit like choosing a university because it looks like a university. Most universities look like universities.

If you allow attraction and chemistry to sweep you immediately into sexual involvement, you will most likely confuse sexual compatibility for something it isn't. Namely, a sign. The fact that you can't keep your hands off of her ... the fact that you can't wait for him to get his hands on you ... is not a sign of anything other than you are two healthy people

who have stumbled across one of the many other healthy people in the world with whom you are sexually compatible. Makes you wonder if this *right person* phenomenon is nature's way of ensuring the human race survives even if relationships don't.

Slow Fade

Physical attraction and chemistry combined with a routine of “my house or yours?” has the potential to diminish the importance of what you've always believed was important for a healthy, go-the-distance relationship. We've never met. But I bet we would agree on what it takes to create a relationship that stands the test of time and the unavoidable trials of life. Unfortunately, those very things get lost or downgraded in the bliss of “we're the exception to all the rules” passion. Treating what's important as unimportant has a price tag. A big price tag. Perhaps you've already paid that tab a time or two. Perhaps it's why you capitulated and bought a book about something you always assumed you could figure out on your own. If that's the case, bear with me as I address my readers who have yet to find themselves in a relationship that promised much but delivered little.

As I mentioned earlier, falling in love requires only a pulse. Staying in love requires *more*. When a couple ignores *more*, they have relationship problems. Why? Because in the beginning they ignored all of that silly relationship stuff. They didn't need it. That was for other people, people who weren't in love like they were in love. But, over time, the

connection that was once so effortless and passionate, so sexually charged, begins to fade. Instead of chemistry and passion, there's tension and frustration. The chemistry that fueled the *right person* mystique ebbs. Both parties begin looking for ways to return things to their former state. Guys suggest more sex. After all, that's what fueled things in the beginning. Guys view sex like a wrench. More on that later. Women are generally the first to use the "R" word. "I think we need to talk about our relationship." Women are often the first to recommend outside help. Men generally don't want any help. With anything. I'll tell you why. The way we figure it, we didn't need any outside help in the beginning, so why would we need it now? We didn't need a counselor to help us fall in love. We shouldn't have to hire a counselor to keep us in love. Besides, counseling is just a bunch of words. Like this book. So we don't go. And we don't buy relationship books.

Dumb Married Tricks

As attraction and chemistry wane, it's not uncommon for somebody to suggest having a baby. Men think, *Well, that requires sex, so yeah*. If you've never been married, you're thinking, *Why would anyone bring a baby into a relationship that's already on life support?* Good question. If you're married, or were married, you may be wondering why you didn't ask yourself that very question. But don't beat yourself up. You were looking for a way back. A way back to what you had. To what you felt. You were looking for common

ground. Common interest. Couples try all kinds of things to rekindle what once was. As they should. The alternatives aren't good. Give up or soldier on in a lifeless, passionless relationship. My point is, finding the *right person* is no guarantee that things will turn out *right*. In fact, leaning into the right person myth almost guarantees they won't.

All the Wrong Options

Before we move on, I want to go back to the “maybe a baby will help” idea. Bringing a baby into a troubled relationship is a bad idea for many reasons. Not least of which is that one of the most morally vulnerable times in the life of a man is when his wife or girlfriend is pregnant. This is true in healthy relationships, but the temptation is compounded when things aren't going well. While 15 percent of married couples divorce within three years of the birth of their first child,² the percentage of unmarried couples who separate after the birth of a child is closer to 40 percent.³ Children aren't a solution. They aren't meant to be. Children should be a welcomed addition to a healthy family unit.

But men aren't the only ones who start looking elsewhere when things aren't going well. As the *right person* approach starts unraveling, everybody is open to a new *right person*. And social media has made it easier than ever to wade through the options.

In fact, second marriages have a higher failure rate than first marriages. Sixty-seven percent of second and 73 percent of third marriages end in divorce. Know why? People

approach a second marriage the way they did their first one. They go looking for the next right person. Why not? Once you find the *right person*, everything will be all right.

Right?

Anyone?

Mirror, Mirror

So if *finding* the right person doesn't guarantee everything will be all right, what does?

Nothing.

Nothing *guarantees* everything will be all right. But there *is* an approach that will increase your odds. Significantly. In chapter two I'll start unpacking it for you. But before we go there, I need you to do me a big favor. If you're currently in a relationship your friends and your momma disapprove of—and you and Mr. or Miss Right seem to be the only ones who are certain the relationship is *right*—slow down. A lot. Better yet, would you hit the pause button until you've finished this book? Please. What you feel is real. But it may not be reliable. I've never met a happy couple whose story included, "Everybody, including our parents, told us we had no business being together, but we ignored their advice and we're glad we did." On the other hand, I've talked to dozens of people whose relationships ended poorly and who admitted they were warned but refused to listen. They believed love (or whatever it was) was enough. But it wasn't. It never is. Many of those folks admitted they had reservations. But out of stubbornness, or a desire to prove somebody wrong, or

fear of regret because of moral boundaries they had crossed, they pushed ahead. They tuned out the voices of those who loved them most and made the biggest mistake of their lives. It felt *right* at the time. Of course it did. They'd found the *right* person. So, do me a favor. Hit the pause button. You'll be glad you did.

COMMITMENT IS OVERRATED

Every Saturday, in cities all over America, starry-eyed couples join hands, say vows, exchange rings, and make promises they have every *intention* of keeping but with little to no *preparation* for doing so. They mean well. I doubt there are many instances of brides or grooms being intentionally dishonest. But in the majority of cases these well-intentioned, beautifully adorned men and women make promises they just aren't equipped to keep.

Chances are you've attended a wedding where you suspected this to be the case. You wished the couple well, but in your heart you suspected things weren't going to go well. You've witnessed couples making commitments you suspected they weren't prepared to keep. You didn't need a crystal ball to predict their future or a bookie to determine their odds. You wished 'em the best but saved your receipt. The tension you experienced in that intuitive moment was

based on your suspicion that they weren't prepared for what they promised.

In the realm of relationships, unlike any other arena of life, we operate from the premise that a *promise* replaces the need for *preparation*. That a couple can *promise, vow, or commit* themselves into a successful future. But our experience in other areas proves that to be patently false. In the world of academics, sports, business, medicine—you name the field—preparation is the key to success. There's not a college coach anywhere who would dream of substituting promises or vows for preparation. Coaches know that you don't promise to win games; you prepare to win. Good students know they must prepare for exams, not just stare in the mirror and promise to do well. It's one thing to sign up for a race; it's another thing to prepare for it. If you're not prepared, it's a waste of time to promise a good finish time. In every arena of life, preparation is the key to success. This is true for relationships as well.

But for reasons having more to do with marketing than common sense, our culture completely ignores this indisputable reality. Very few people *prepare*. Most people are content to *commit*. When it comes to relationships, commitment is way overrated. WAY. Promises and commitments are no substitute for preparation.

Capable vs. Accountable

Saying "I do" doesn't make a person *capable*, only *accountable*. When you're *accountable* for something you're not

capable of, you will eventually be *miserable*. Remember Algebra 2? Was it just me? If you marry or commit yourself to someone who is not prepared to reciprocate, you're going to hold the person accountable. Which means you are going to make his or her life *miserable*. And his or her lack of commitment will become the primary source of your own misery. Sounds pretty miserable.

Again, you can't promise, commit, or vow your way past a lack of preparation. Neither can the person you are promising, committing, or vowing to. A promise is no substitute for preparation. You must prepare to commit if your commitment is going to mean anything. And your partner must as well.

So do yourself a big favor. Don't make a relational commitment you aren't prepared to keep. Notice I didn't say *committed* to keep. Prepared to keep. And don't commit yourself to someone who is unprepared to keep his or her commitment to you. Odds are you've already done that somewhere along the way. You don't want a repeat performance. But in order to avoid one, you must begin thinking and behaving differently.

Which brings us to the important but extraordinarily uncomfortable question: *How do you know?* How do you know if you're prepared to commit? How do you know if your *right person* is prepared?

Everybody Ought to Know

Fortunately, the answer to that question is simple. Unfortunately, it's so simple nobody pays much attention to it.

Well, almost nobody. Parents do. The best way to know if someone is prepared to commit is to examine his or her prior commitments. If you want to know how someone will behave tomorrow, take a look at what he or she did yesterday.

Are there exceptions?

Of course.

Should you make a significant relationship decision assuming you will be the exception?

Never.

As in never ever.

It's too risky. Not only that, it's unnecessary.

Every couple thinks they are the exception. Chalk that up to chemistry and romance. The good news is, there are ways to discover whether you might be the exception without gambling with your relational future.

Don't Take My Word for It

The notion of an inexorable link between preparation and the ability to keep a promise is certainly not original with me. Neither is the connection between past and future performance. Oddly enough, the embryo of both ideas is found in a statement made thousands of years ago by one of the wisest men who ever lived, King Solomon. In his library of proverbs we find the following:

The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps.

(PROVERBS 14:15)

“The simple believe anything.” The term translated *simple* is also translated *naïve* in other ancient Hebrew literature. Naïve people are those who believe just about anything they are told. Being naïve is not an IQ problem; it stems from a lack of experience. This is why we associate the term with younger people. Time and life have a way of erasing naiveté. Only a naïve person would think to run a marathon without training. And only a naïve couple would enter a marriage based on a promise alone, even if they exchanged rings as part of their commitment. Their lack of preparation in the days leading up to the marriage would be a good predictor of their performance after the wedding day. Wouldn’t it?

And now for the second part of Solomon’s couplet:

... but the prudent give thought to their steps.

We don’t talk about *prudent* people much these days. A prudent person is someone who understands life is connected, that today’s decisions have implications for tomorrow’s reality. Prudent people understand that what we do today is a good indication of how we will behave tomorrow. While naïve people tend to view events and decisions in *isolation*, the prudent person assumes a *connection*. The prudent person knows the best indicator of her future behavior is her past behavior.

The term *steps* in this proverb refers to direction. You know the future direction of a thing by connecting the dots of where said thing has been. The future is always potential. The past is measurable and observable. The past makes the future predictable.

Solomon's point? Prudent people, wise men and women, put very little stock in promises. Instead, they look carefully at the trajectory of their lives and the lives of those around them. If you want to know where you're headed, all you have to do is look back to see where you've been. If you want to know where your *right person* is headed, just take a look at where he or she has been. Discount the promises but pay attention to the dots, the patterns. Again, the paths people choose trump the commitments they make. The paths people have chosen trump the promises they've made. *The past is a better indicator than a promise.*

Sound a bit harsh?

Ungraceful?

Unforgiving?

Is there a voice in your head screaming, "But people change!" or, "But she's trying," or, "He's doing better"? What about, "He has a job interview tomorrow"? "She hasn't had a drink in two weeks"? "He hasn't missed a single visit with his parole officer"?

I understand. I really do. I'm all for forgiveness and grace. And I believe that people change. But I don't believe that *people* change *people*. And I don't believe that people change *for* people. People change themselves. People change themselves when they get sick and tired of themselves, when the pain of staying the same is too great to bear or there's a goal so enticing that it draws them away from what and who they used to be.

But no one *depends* his or her way to change. People *depend* their way into dependency. Dependency leads to a

loss of self-respect, which often leads to a loss of respect from the person the dependent person is depending upon. And that usually leads to a loss of relationship.

My point? If you are in a relationship with someone who has a spotty track record relationally, financially, professionally, morally, chemical dependently . . . and this special person is promising that the future will be different now that *you* are in his life, please pay careful attention to the next couple of paragraphs. And no, you aren't going to like them. And yes, somebody else has probably already told you this. And no, I have not been talking to your momma.

Think for a minute about the biggest positive change you've made in your life thus far: relational, financial, professional, academic, whatever. It may have involved breaking a habit or addiction. What is something you are proud of having accomplished because it represents a major stride forward for you?

Next, think about your greatest regret. Not something that happened *to* you, but a regret that involved a decision or series of decisions *you* made. A regret that you brought in part upon yourself. Got it? Now be honest. What was the primary contributor to the event or season of your life you regret most? Chances are someone else was involved. Perhaps a group of people. People you liked. People you trusted. Our greatest regrets often do. It may have been someone you loved. You believed moving in his or her direction would make your life better, richer. But in the end, it wasn't so.

Now reflect on the change that has made the greatest positive impact on your life to date. It may have been the

decision to leave the individual or individuals associated with your greatest regret. Perhaps it was a decision to go to school or go back to school. You may have broken an addiction or attempted something that drew you out of your comfort zone.

Last question: What contributed most to that positive change? You may have been encouraged by others. You may have found inspiration in the stories of others. Perhaps someone you respected and loved believed in you and spoke to your potential. But in the end, wasn't it *your* decision to act, to engage, to move forward, to move out, that brought about the change you celebrate? You did not *depend* your way forward. On the contrary, you in-depended your way forward. You came to the point where you knew you had to change, and you decided that no matter what it took, things were going to be different. You made up your mind that the status quo was no more. And once you did, you fought your way through. You shook something off. You moved on with your life. You *chose* your way forward. Others may have cheered you on. But the change came about because of something *you* did for *you*.

Right?

Here's my point: Nobody changed you. You changed you. If you're religious, you may say God changed you or God helped you to change. But when all was said and done, the change that occurred took place because you made up your mind to change.

So please hear me. If you're in a relationship with someone who is depending on you to help him or her become a

better person (i.e., change), it's not going to happen. That is beyond your ability. You can't change another person for the better any more than that person can change you. *People will change when they decide to change.* If you're in a relationship because you believe your *right person* is going to help you change, you're wasting your most valuable resource: time. To put it bluntly, you're wasting your life. Your *right person* can't change you. You are expecting the impossible. In fact, the dependency you have developed is probably an impediment to the change you long to experience. *You will change when you decide to change.* Again, no one depends his or her way to change. Change requires fierce in-dependence that should eventually lead to inter-dependence with other healthy people.

With that in mind, I would like to make a suggestion. If you have concerns about the direction in which your *right person* is moving in life, give her time and space to change. I know; I know; you love her. All the more reason to give her time and space to get her life together. Time and space equals respect. Time and space says, "I know you can do this, and you don't need me as a crutch."

And yes, if you give her time and space, you may lose her. She may go in search of another crutch. Somebody else to depend on. You may cry yourself to sleep or drink yourself into a stupor. Either way, you're better off. Because, as it turns out, she wasn't the *right person* for you after all. She's not in a position to keep the promise she's made or is planning to make. She's not prepared to commit. If she needs

you to help her become someone who can keep her promise, where does that leave you? So give her time and space.

Speeding in the Wrong Direction

I've never met a couple that wished they had moved faster. I have talked to hundreds of fresh-out-of-a-relationship individuals who wished they had moved slower. I've talked to more people than I can count who went into relationships with the goal of *helping* or *changing* their partner. Perhaps you've already tried that. Perhaps you were on the other side of the equation. You latched onto someone you believed could help you. And he did. For a while. Until you wore him out and now he's moved on to help someone else. And you aren't feeling very "helped." You are no better off than when you met him. Just older. Perhaps bitter. If that's the case, keep reading. I'm not going to leave you hanging.

So yes, people change. They change direction; they get healthier; they break habits, overcome addictions. But until they do, they will be unable to keep their promises and follow through on their vows. If you believe the change your *right person* is promising depends on you, you are making a gamble that in all probability will not pay off. Might as well drive around with your seatbelt unbuckled. Every once in a while, people walk away from collisions that occurred when they were not wearing their seatbelts. It's possible. But I'm guessing you'll continue to buckle up. Sure wish you would consider that same approach in the arena of romance. Seatbelts are a hassle. Waiting for someone to change before

jumping into a relationship is a hassle. But both are worth the hassle. Seatbelts save lives. Sitting on the sidelines while someone you care about gets his life together may save you a chapter or two of unnecessary regret.

When you hear (or hear yourself saying) any of the following lines, you owe it to yourself to press pause:

- “I can’t live without you.”
- “I can’t make it without you.”
- “I’m not sure I want to live without you.”
- “I’ll never overcome this without you.”
- “With your help, I can become a better person.”
- “Before you came along, I was lost.”
- “I need you.”
- “I’m incomplete without you.”

On the silver screen or in your favorite romance novel those lines usually lead to good things. But in the real world they lead to hard times. They are red flags. Those are *declarations of dependence*. They’re tantamount to saying, “I’m weak; you’re strong. I need you to be strong for both of us.” For some personalities, that’s an irresistible invitation. Caretakers love to provide care. Fixers love to fix. Rescuers love to rescue. You may be among that special group who has never seen a need you didn’t want to meet. Especially when the “need” is hot or rich. But none of that changes the fact that you cannot fix other people. You cannot change them. You can prop them up until you are worn out. In the end, they will be who they are—and you will be tired.

If you *really* care, create space and wait. If the other person really cares, he or she won't fault you for your decision. What's the rush? What are you afraid of?

Don't be *simple*.

Give thought to the other person's *steps*.

Don't be *simple*.

Give thought to your *steps*.

Commit. Not to a person, not to a relationship. Commit *now* to preparing to keep your commitments *later*. That's the goal, what you should focus on. If you do, when you say "I do," you'll be prepared to follow through. If all this leaves you wondering how one prepares to make commitments he or she is prepared to keep, keep reading.