

Forget Prince Charming

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Learning Goals

- present personal views based on ideas in an essay
 - evaluate coherence in an essay's structure
 - relate ideas to other works of literature
 - develop a survey quiz
 - research and present a short oral or written report
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I don't believe for a moment that a perfect mate exists and if such a freak of nature did occur that person would not be a heavenly match for me because I am imperfect and we would clash. But I have three granddaughters of marriageable age and I frequently advise them on such matters as how to run their lives and what they should require of a mate.

The primary consideration, I tell them, is that they cannot expect perfection. No human relationship is friction-free. Even siblings who are fond of one another have clashes, and they come from the same gene pool. There is no possibility that two adults from different backgrounds will agree on everything, and discord over trivia is not evidence of a mismatch.

The notion of a perfect mate exists because of the temporary insanity that accompanies courtship, when people experience what Freud called "the oceanic feeling." Self-protective edges disappear in a wash of uncritical attentiveness. The two in love become one sensate being, their emotions so attuned to one another that the existential loneliness of the human condition is masked. People in the first fiery intensity of romantic attachment bring out the sweetness in one another and are all the better for it.

Amazingly, the pounding heart is not always an idiot; some inner wisdom or instinct seems to guide many people to the right choice, and on they might never have made cognitively. Besides, passionate physical attraction is nature's plan for the species and without it relationships are cold gruel. The major flaw in ecstatic beginnings, however, is the expectation they arouse that, lifelong, the partnership will be effortless. No fundamental problems are ever resolved by two people moving in together; the best hope is that a stable relationship will enable each person to work on them.

All long-term couplings survive on a mutual ability to compromise, which is the same glue that holds our peculiar country together. Some matters are not negotiable, of course; violence and betrayal are definitely deal-breakers. But happily married people make concessions to one another's peculiarities all the time, and the exchange rarely is 50-50. The totality has to feel fair to both, but real life is far too complex for a balance scale to be relevant.

A wise Canadian child psychologist, the late Dr. William Blatz, was asked the secret of his serene marriage. He replied, "I make the dressing and she makes the salad." A dressing is a *lot* quicker to make than a salad, but people got the picture. The wedlock was a collaboration effort.

It may be significant that our granddaughters have scattered beyond the immediate reach of my wise counsel on the subject of choosing a mate. One is in India, either near the Ganges or Thailand doing something for *The New York Times*. No matter. We stay in contact through e-mail and I proffer endless help in what I take to be their pursuit of love and fulfillment, which may be synonymous states.

What I have been saying to them since they were so small I could hold them on my lap is that successful mating has little to do with finding Prince Charming, who in my experience frequently is a narcissistic dope. Romantic novelists have the ideal all wrong, I explain. The first quality they should seek in their partner is integrity. Someone who cheats on an expense account or can't admit fault will be dishonest in a myriad of other ways as well. For the long haul, they want a truth speaker.

Punctuality is an important clue to character, I continue. Chronic tardiness indicates to me a lack of respect for the waiting person that goes to the heart of consideration for others. I also insist on compassion, which rests on the fine bedrock of empathy. A helpful clue to this attribute can be found in the way the person behaves around small children. Anyone who stops to admire a baby probably had good parenting and will hang in with loyalty and kindness through the adversities that most certainly lie ahead.

I also stress humour, by which I don't mean joke telling, which can also be an indication of the need for attention and a paucity of anything interesting to say. However humour that springs from awareness of life's absurdities is the hallmark of a humane outlook. The ability to put matters in perspective and a knack for leavening bad times with a comical observation make life infinitely more bearable. My husband had something genuinely funny to say while we were burying our son, and it helped a great deal.

Come to think of it, my prescription for informed mate choosing seems to be a description of my own mate. We've been married almost fifty-seven years and so far it is working out all right, so what can I say. I'll keep you posted (little joke of my own there).