

A Consumer Approach to Marriage?

By Susan Schnurr

We are a consumer culture, used to comparison shopping and one-year warranties with free replacement parts and service. We are market-wise. If a salesman tells us, "The bugs will work themselves out," we turn around and buy a different model. We all know that if it isn't perfect to start with, it most likely is a lemon.

Unfortunately, when it comes to choosing a mate, we bring our consumer attitudes with us. Fortunately for the human race, human mates are not like cars. You don't get the finished product--just the partially developed raw material. A good marriage improves with age. Today's singles want everything up front, on the counter, now, and they want their mechanic to check the inner workings of the engine before the contract is signed.

Delve into any human being and you will find immaturity, fear, and base impulses as well as more positive feelings. But that kind of probing is indecent unless you have already committed yourself to stand by him/her in spite of the weaknesses. Our parents did not know each other well enough. We know each other too well and too soon and are frightened away. Instead of concentrating on values and character of a prospective mate, we plunge into his/her psyche. I think people have forgotten the distinction. Everyone has dirty laundry in the baggage they grew up with, but it is a person's character--what he has done with his baggage--that is significant to a relationship.

Neither You Nor Your Partner Is Perfect

Marriage is not a matter of acquiring a "perfect" other, but of finding a partner with a value system you respect, a person with whom you can communicate and whom you love, a person whom you really like to be with and would hate to be without.

Your partner will not have all the resources necessary. Neither have you. That is the nature of marriage. You build something bigger than yourselves by combining resources and enhancing one another. Getting married is not a completion, but a beginning. Both partners will change and grow during the process of life together. If you are both committed to the process and to each other, you can succeed. If you are committed to specifications of personality which you view as desirable at 25, 30, or 35, you are bound for disappointment. Your specifications and your partner's qualities will inevitably change.

Single Responsibility Builds Maturity

Men and women complain that maturity is lacking in their prospective partners. I don't think this is at all surprising. We are not a mature generation. Maturity comes with experience and responsibility. Self-support, marriage, raising children, and caring for elderly relatives are all experiences which help develop maturity. Our generation has generally been spared all these. Most of us have parents who helped subsidize our college education or were there to fall back on if the going got rough. We never had to "work or go hungry." Most of us don't work at all; we "have satisfying careers." This is unnatural if we judge from other generations and other countries, but we take it for granted. Anything less than working at a satisfying job with a good salary seems unfair to us. So our job becomes a means of satisfying our self-esteem, not, as it has been for most of recorded time, a responsibility for maintaining life. Likewise, our relatives are living longer in better health. Most of us in our 20's and 30's have not had to take responsibility for an infirm or dying relative. Yes, we have responsibilities in our jobs and organizations, but generally these responsibilities are very far removed from our basic life functions. It is no wonder that in this setting a person is fearful of a lifetime commitment to marriage and later to bearing and raising children.

A couple matures together. By taking responsibility for each other's happiness and well-being, each partner gains maturity. This is not an argument that any two people can be happily married. It is an admonition to singles who like, respect and love each other, but manage to find insurmountable defects in their partners or circumstances as soon as the relationship seems to be headed toward marriage.

Overcoming The Fear of Marriage

I personally know a lot of wonderful Jewish women and equally wonderful Jewish men who are single, so I cannot be convinced that there is a dearth on either side. I am convinced that there is a real and understandable (if unconscious) fear of marriage--of the uncertainties, the responsibilities and of the real effort necessary to make it work. Any intelligent person would have fears. We constantly hear about the high rate of divorce. "Normal" families on TV show a degree of nastiness and pettiness which would frighten off even the most ardent marriage seeker. Further, the media's frequent graphic exposition of child abuse certainly does not lend to an image of happy family life. It's as if all of society were conspiring against successful marriage.

In spite of the bad publicity, marriage can be wonderful. Once singles decide to face their fears and to accept the challenge to make a commitment and accept the responsibilities, the uncertainty and the constant effort necessary in marriage, then the potential partners will seem more appealing and the social obstacles which seemed insurmountable will easily be overcome.