

Dating Vs. Courtship

By Lori Wheeler

“We’re not going to let you date until you’re thirty-five.”

This was a joke my parents made a lot while I was growing up. Whenever we would talk about boys, they would laugh about how I wouldn’t be allowed to get married until my forties. Even though they weren’t serious, they were preparing me for the underlying truth in what they said: I would be held to high standards for my relationships.

Unlike many teens, I have been given far more than vague rules and suggestions for dating. My parents have drawn clear boundary lines for me about how I am to interact with people of the opposite sex. Because of the trust I have for them, I respect these guidelines. It may feel at times that they are trying to control me or keep me “under their thumb”, but I always return to the belief that they genuinely want to see me be successful and regretless.

One of the rules my parents have created for me is that I am not allowed to date until I am ready for marriage. To this day, even as a sixteen-year-old college student, I have abided by this rule. As I have gotten older, I have become painfully aware of how this sets me apart in my generation. At times I have wished that I could blend a little more easily, and date like everyone else. However, especially recently, this rule has given me a platform for an even higher standard that I have set for myself. I have come to the conclusion that I don’t want to avoid dating until I’m ready for marriage: I want to avoid it entirely.

Last year, a friend loaned me a book called Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship. At that point in my life, most of the “dating rules” I obeyed were just boundaries my parents had created. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be like the average teenager; it was that I wasn’t allowed to be. Despite any pre-conceived biases against courtship, I convinced myself to read the book. Within the first few pages, I was completely engulfed in it. It was almost like I was reading a novel. Little did I know at the time, but the concepts from that book would change the way I viewed relationships from then on. The success of my future romance became a shared burden between me and my parents. I suddenly became interested in not only abiding by my parents’ rules, but also in taking them a step further. The week that I picked up that book, I met courtship.

I must be careful to mention that I don’t consider myself an expert on the issues of dating or courtship. But I can say that I have spent quite some time considering the benefits and downfalls of both. Having taken more responsibility for my relational success, I have endeavored to find which will produce better results. Thus far, I am convinced that the current trends of dating are detrimental to relationships and should be avoided.

To the majority of people, dating must seem fairly innocuous. And rightly so, considering it is so familiar to United States culture. So, when I bring it up as a negative concept, many people are either confused or defensive. In light of this, I would like to begin simply by looking at the actual term “dating.” Though it is certainly defined in the dictionary, by no means does it carry the same connotations for everyone. The seemingly

simple concept is actually quite complex. Every person who uses the word “date” or its derivatives brings to the table their own set of biases, experiences, and interpretations. In turn, they also have very different expectations for what will take place. One may anticipate sex and the other no physical contact; one could be thinking of marriage while the other wants little more than a one-night-stand. It is interesting to contrast this confusion with the system of arranged marriages in other countries. Many people still agree to marriages where the match is made by parents and relatives, without giving much of their own input (“Arranged Marriage Facts”). To people of Western culture, this may seem ridiculous. Objections to the process come easily. But there is at least one benefit that comes from these arrangements: young people know the rules and expectations long before they consider marriage. They aren’t left to flounder about, wondering what to do or say, or how to go about their future. In the United States, dating isn’t so simple. It seems that people know little about what they believe and expect, let alone what others are thinking.

All in all, it would be impossible –not to mention absurd– to try and encompass every interpretation of dating. What I say about it must be based solely on trends and observations, not on solid fact. As the reader, you will likely disagree with some of my generalizations. But I remain hopeful that I will be able to briefly encapsulate the trouble with dating as a whole.

The first thing I would like to mention about dating is that it often lacks an overall purpose. Oftentimes dating seems to be an end in itself, rather than a means to an end; something people do for fun, entertainment, social status, etc. In other words, it is used sort of like an accessory. A person might put it on because it makes him or her feel good or other people like the way it looks. At first thought, that might not seem so harmful. Why is it bad to date for fun? Put simply, the answer is that entangling two lives is not a simple task. When physical, emotional, and spiritual beings devote themselves to one another, the effect is multilevel intimacy; whether intended or not. Relationships should not be taken lightly. The effects ripple outward into the lives of far more than a single person.

Another problem I have found with dating is that it encourages a couple to spend large amounts of time alone. Though there certainly isn’t anything wrong with spending time alone with someone, at least three problems arise when you do so in mass quantities or early in a relationship. First of all, when you get to know someone strictly on an individual level, you don’t get to see them interact with other people very often, if at all. The time spent together might be reserved to one-on-one activities, and huge aspects of personality are missed. How can one see the way their partner responds to competitive sports, authority figures, children, etc.? You may think you know everything about someone, but some facets of their personality may be hidden unless they are exposed in certain situations.

The second problem with spending time alone comes back to the idea of time alone early in the relationship. Dates often require that you are alone with someone you don’t know very well. This puts even smart, well-meaning people at risk for physical abuse. Over

three-quarters of all rapes are classified as “date rapes” (Hardcastle). Unfortunately, not every single person had good intentions on a date. Many dating situations don’t provide time to develop trust in relationship before spending time alone together. In fact, many tips on preventing date rape go against dating trends. They say to avoid spending time alone with someone until you fully trust them, avoid secluded places, etc. (“Date Rape”) It is important to note that date rape isn’t the only possible negative outcome. Being alone with someone unfamiliar could lead to harassment, verbal abuse, violent abuse, and many other problems. Though these are very practical and severe problems, they are worthy of mention. Preserving physical safety should be a very basic high priority within a relationship.

The final problem with spending too much time alone together has little to do with the other person, and more to do with personal standards. In an article I read recently, a writer summed up the problem perfectly: “To sleep or not to sleep with someone on the first date — or after a chance meeting, for that matter — is a major decision,” she said. “Yet between husky whispers, succulent kisses and clothes on the floor, the decision often becomes an afterthought.” (Fulbright) The problem described extends far beyond sex or the first date. The truth is that if you are alone with someone you are physically attracted to, sometimes your better judgment is absent. Most people would like to think that they would be able to withstand an impulse that goes against their morals, but it is difficult. After some tempting time alone, you can quickly become worn down from inner conflict. Common dating practice can easily put a couple at risk for making choices they will both regret.

Outside the problem of alone time, another trend in dating is the tendency for a couple to take things too quickly. This problem often starts very early in a relationship when the entire “friendship” stage is skipped. Many people seem to gloss over the importance of a platonic relationship pre-romance. I will return to this issue later on, but when you jump from strangers to a couple, you’re opening yourself up to several problems. You could easily be wasting time, effort and thought. Or, as mentioned earlier, you could be putting yourself in physical danger. Without being friends with someone first, you fail to get to know their personality before dating.

Though there are likely more problems than I know, the final one I would like to mention is simply the tendency for dating to become all-consuming. With all of the time spent together, and the fast pace of dating, it is easy to lose sight of who you are as an individual. By all means practice selflessness, but it is important to maintain connections with friends, family, and mentors. This is especially important when you consider that a relationship may not last forever. It is possible that you might move on, and have little left.

In analysis of problems, you often arrive at a need for solution. Dating is no different; though it may seem innocent at first thought, it carries many underlying ills and instabilities. In research for this paper, I stumbled upon a very thought-provoking quote. I was reading a book entitled The Truth About Teens and Sex by Sabrina Weill. In it, she quoted a teen girl who said, “My parents want me to be a virgin until marriage, but in

today's society that is just an impossibility." (Weill 26) I was taken aback when I read that. I personally know several couples who remained abstinent until marriage, so I know that it is absolutely possible. The problem is that society presents people with fake walls. Trends and norms convince them that when it comes to relationships, there are some things that you just cannot avoid. Could the inevitability of dating be one of those fake walls? It is possible, if not likely, that many people are convinced dating is the only way. When they are presented with an alternative, they feel that they it is "just an impossibility." I cannot speak conclusively for the thoughts of American people, but what I can say is that it is possible to avoid dating and still experience romance. Courtship can entirely replace the dating process. It is not perfect, but courtship is better than dating because it encourages a couple to define their terms, consider their purposes, be involved in public or group activities, take things slowly, and remember their individual lives.

In modern America, courtship isn't a commonly used term. Even though I strongly support it, I can easily conjure scenes similar to *Little House on the Prairie* when I think about it: A young boy removes his hat on the front porch of his female friend. He knocks nervously, knowing that her father will answer. To him the seconds seem like hours, as time drags between the knock and the creak of the opening door. When it finally opens, the girl's father eyes the boy suspiciously. He knows why the boy is there. Thus begins a courtship.

If you associate courtship with anything even slightly similar to this, you can understand why people tend to either not know what it means to court, or to harbor negative associations with the process. However, if you substitute courtship for dating, at very least it invites the opportunity to define terms. Dating is something we think we understand, but very few people would actually agree on its definition. Courtship, however, is such a foreign term that it provides the opportunity to discuss what it means. Because it is so unfamiliar, I would like to define courtship. I must first mention that courtship does contain boundaries. In our post-hippie culture, we seem to be living in the wake of the whole "free" movement. During the 1960's, you could do just about anything you wanted and get away with it; especially with love and sex. There was often no dating, courtship, or any sort of prelude to a couple sleeping together. They may not have even seen one another again after a sexual encounter. Though the same does not apply for today, many of these "no boundaries" ideals seem to still exist. In Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's book *Nation of Rebels*, they discussed the very problem I've mentioned.

... the sexual revolution had the effect of destroying all of the traditional social norms that had governed relations between the sexes, without replacing them with any new ones... The result was not liberation, it was hell. The absence of settled rules meant that no one knew what to expect from anyone else. (Heath and Potter 77)

Long ago, in scenes like the one of the boy on the front porch, people knew what to expect of romance and relationship. In most cases, people knew how to handle the

experience and what was expected of them. Since the emergence of the hippie culture, we are confronted with major confusion. This has created many, if not all, of the problems I have described with dating. There are no set boundaries in dating, and we must understand that this is a dangerous lack. Boundaries provide a structure on which we build and develop our own way of thinking.

Possibly the most valuable element of courtship is that it maintains a fairly consistent purpose: to create serious relationships. Courting is not about simply “having a good time,” or “seeing what happens.” It is about getting to know someone and discovering whether or not they are compatible with you. So, this practically demands that you ask yourself a simple question: why am I starting this relationship in the first place? If it is purely for entertainment, sex, or social status, courtship isn’t for you. By all means, continue dating. But don’t stop at considering your intentions; take time to consider the implications and consequences of them. Chances are, if you use a relationship for any of the reasons I mentioned, you will discover that you are either wasting time or inviting baggage that you didn’t intend for.

For fear of scaring people away, I feel the need to dispel the myth that courtship means everything is serious all of the time. If you’re courting someone, it’s okay to have fun. In fact, if you aren’t having any fun, you are doing something wrong. Even if your long-term goals and intentions are serious, your time together should maintain romance and fun. Otherwise, you will be headed for failure.

Another benefit of courtship is that it encourages couples to spend time with groups or doing group activities. As I previously mentioned, dating presents you with at least three problems when it comes to “alone time”: lack of interaction with other people, risk of physical abuse, and “heat of the moment” pressure. First of all, when you court, you do get to see the person interact with others. This allows you to discover things about them that you normally might not see. Second, group involvement reduces risk of physical abuse. Not only can it prevent abuse from happening, but it can also help you to catch warning signs if the person cannot be trusted. The people around you can help you to see a person’s character more clearly. Last, when you’re occupied with people or activities, you avoid the temptation to do things you’d rather not. You don’t have to completely rely on yourself to prevent things from going too far. You are focusing less on the one-on-one relationship, and more on what is going around you.

When it comes to the idea of “group activity,” I think there is a common myth that you can’t spend any time alone as a couple. People envision themselves trying to go out on dates with everyone watching, or with a parent peeking over their shoulder. This isn’t the way it works. Though during courtship you should spend time in groups of people, you are going to need to get to know the person one-on-one. The key is that you wait until you trust the person and, even then, limit the amount of time you spend alone. You could easily spare yourself a lot of trouble this way.

As you may have guessed, courtship also encourages a couple to take things slowly. In relationships, we seem to have a tendency to rush from one level to the next. Courtship is

about slowing things down and getting to know someone in increments. It is similar to the new idea of “slow movement.” (Slow Movement) The basic idea behind this movement is that our culture has taken things into an overly fast-paced high gear, and we’re losing important connections because of it. “We are engaged in a constant fast-forward motion whereby we are often overscheduled, stressed and rushing towards the next task,” reads the website home page. Might we be treating our relationships in the same way? With the ways that we quickly move from one person or “level” to the next, we don’t seem to be truly connecting with people and analyzing relationships. We are also missing chances to practice long-term commitments. It is even possible that there is a connection between serial dating and our inability to create marriages that last. Part of taking things slowly in courtship is making friendship a priority. Before you claim one another as partners, take time to “just be friends.” It sounds very cliché, but it has nothing to do with ignoring physical attraction or faking that you don’t “feel anything.” It is simply an important step in getting to know someone. Take time to get to know a person’s beliefs, interests, and hobbies before you become a couple. If possible, get to know their friends and family as well, to understand their vantage point as a person.

There are several myths about and objections to the idea of friendship before courtship. One is that dating should be the step before courtship. People have an idea that dating is like the uncommitted “first rung on the ladder,” and later on, you may court for marriage. However, this is unnecessary. Friendship is the perfect opportunity to learn who someone is and what they stand for. During this time, you may discover that you are completely incompatible and the relationship will not work. Or, if things go well, you may find that the two of you get along well and there may be something deeper in your future as a couple.

Confusion also enters when people think about finding romance in friendship. They talk about how they have a best friend of the opposite sex who they could never consider dating. Can friends fall in love? In an article on relationships, an expert said, “People who have studied attachment pretty much have learned that if two people are physically proximate and neither does bad things to the other, they can fall in love. They just have to be around each other enough.” (Lawrence) The idea here is that even if two people never felt attracted to each other to begin with, friendship might become love. However, the more likely scenario would be that two people are attracted to each other in the beginning, but they wait on the attraction to find out if it is grounded and healthy. The last confusion I have found with friendship and courtship is that people are concerned with the idea of “opposites attract.” How can I date my friends, they say, if friends are like me and partners are unlike me? The truth about this misconception is exactly that: it is a misconception. A recent study showed that “In Western society, humans use neither an 'opposites-attract' nor a 'reproductive-potentials-attract' rule in their choice of long-term partners, but rather a 'likes-attract' rule based on a preference for partners who are similar to themselves across a number of characteristics.” (Lawrence) Though we’ve held onto this idea for so long, it is being proven untrue. People generally look for partners who are somewhat like them. This isn’t to say that couples will not have differences, but it is to say that they will most likely be similar on

many levels. It does matter whether you agree on religion, politics, goals, etc. So, if the truth is that likes attract, you may find a solid relationship within your circle of friends and acquaintances.

The last benefit of courtship as opposed to dating is that it has the ability to confront the problem of an all-consuming relationship. Courtship truly encourages you to remember yourself as an individual, apart from who you are as a partner. When you court, your focus is not exclusively on the other person; the other relationships in your life are also be maintained. This is especially true of your connections with mentors and people you trust for advice. They aren't crowded out because you are too focused on the romance. When they are involved in the relationship, they can give valuable insight about you and your partner. As a couple, two people can easily become blind to what is really going on. It is important that they have other people around us to bring them "back to earth" if they aren't thinking clearly. Part of courtship is making sure that you take time away from the relationship. This doesn't mean a six-month break; just don't spend 24/7 with the person. Take time for yourself, to do your best to think objectively and evaluate things that are happening. How are you feeling in the relationship? Are things progressing the way you want them to, or are your expectations different from what you are getting?

I feel the need now to address a very key point: in the end, it is not really about the words we use. If you're willing to discuss your terms, you could take everything good about courtship and apply it to dating. There is little about courtship that strictly belongs to courtship. In fact, you may already interpret dating in a way that follows many courtship guidelines. The real point of what I am saying is that common practices are falling short in many ways. They are causing people to regret their choices, get hurt, and fail in relationships. Guidelines simply help people create good, healthy relationships and avoid regret as much as possible. This is not to say that we should be constantly afraid, but that we should be cautious and smart when it comes to the choices we make. In 1997, a young man named Joshua Harris wrote a book called I Kissed Dating Goodbye. He wrote it a few years after he had broken up with his long-time girlfriend at seventeen. (Harris 21) At the time of the break-up, the couple had been together for about two years, and Josh decided that things just weren't going the way he wanted them to. The relationship ended unhappily. "My dreams of romance had ended in compromise, bitterness, and regret," Josh recalled in his writing, "I walked away asking, 'Is this how it has to be?'" In his search for something better, he literally kissed dating goodbye and was single for several years. Yet during that time, he maintained a desire to be married one day in the future.

In 2000, Joshua published a follow-up book called Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship. Much of the book is devoted to describing the process of courtship. It is full of success stories, from both Joshua's relationship with his wife Shannon and others. These people have found a way to create successful relationships without dating. They still experienced romance, mystery, and many other things that people are looking for in a relationship, but without piles of regrets and despair. I must give credit to Josh for giving people hope in a frustrating time for relationships. Now, more than ever, we need to be asking, "Is this how it has to be?"