

Dating and the Covenant

We are formatted for relationship. From the moment of birth, to be with someone in a meaningful, life-giving connection constitutes the greatest quest mankind ever undertakes. The roots of this quest lie in the Image of God which indelibly colors everything he does. Since God existed from before all time as a Trinity (a relationship), then it is a matter of course that his creatures would bear something of the same nature. In this sense, we are created covenantally.

However, relationship does not exist in a vacuum. Being together is not satisfying in and of itself. Even the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by the roles that are played in their “economic” existence (Father eternally begets, the Son is the eternally begotten one, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son). Therefore, it is inevitable that the understanding of the roles we relate in will largely determine the relationship we are in.

Therefore, every relationship begs for a definition. When we relate to one another, we do so through the use of roles to explain our behavior within those roles. When I talk to my spouse, I do so as a husband. That relationship comes with various expectations and degrees of acceptable, appropriate behavior. When I spend an afternoon with my parents, I do so as a son. As a student, there is a role that exists between teacher and learner. These roles are learned intuitively from birth.

The roles, of course, are dynamic. They are always changing. My wife and I had to undergo a fair amount of “adjustment” in our own relationship when our children were born. My parents had to endure many phases of re-defining our relationship as I progressed through various phases of life. In my role as pastor to college students, I have learned that Biblical pastoring is to be described as continually re-evaluating my own understanding of my relationship with the students under my care to better produce Biblical results.

When two single individuals begin to have regular contact with each other, the roles are not so easily defined. We know by instinct the behavior that is appropriate to other relationships. For instance, we learned as a child that when we spoke in a certain way, namely disrespectfully, to our parents, we were corrected with, “You’re not going to talk to your parents that way.” We saw classmates that were punished for certain behaviors in the classroom and knew which behavior were and were not appropriate.

Dating, likewise, at least in its 21st century American manifestation, comes with “appropriate” behaviors that are equally as instinctive. Where a young person picks up these values and expectations is anyone’s guess, but peers and pop culture probably top the list. But without a doubt, dating relationships fall into discernable patterns.

- First, some kind of interest is expressed. This is almost never done directly or verbally, but is usually hinted at and makes use of a network of close friends. In other words, she took a fancy to him so she made sure that someone told him that she was “interested,” or something to that effect.

- Second, the interest gets formalized by a first date. Sometimes these are direct (ie, subject A asks out subject B) or indirect (subject A makes sure to end up in a group with subject B and they “hang out” or spend a night talking or whatever.)
- Third, the interest is nurtured. By this is meant that the two individuals in question will find other means to spend time together. Direct approaches to dating are usually more acceptable during this time and there is usually a small but growing “buzz” surrounding their “dating” among their friends.
- Fourth, the relationship is institutionalized. This is the key moment in the modern dating ritual. There is usually a conversation between the two that arises out of any number of factors, but it is usually brought about by *frustration*. VERY rarely does either party reflect on this frustration because it feels so much like what they have always imagined love to be. In other words, they wish they knew what was “going on.” “What’s going on between the two of us,” they might ask. Sometimes, one individual is frustrated because the “buzz” has escalated to the point where there are many questions they have to field from their friends.

Whatever the motivation is that initiates the conversation, typically the conversation involves a couple of things: 1) how one person feels about the other, “I have really loved spending time with you lately,” 2) what the person’s intentions are about the future, “And I have decided that I only want to date you.” If the other person agrees, there is a clear threshold that has been crossed after the conversation. They will usually tell their friends, “Well, we’re dating now,” or “Well, we had ‘the talk’ last night and it’s official.” But in their minds, something has been pledged, though when quizzed about it, they can offer precious little information about what has actually happened between them.

For instance, years ago, I had a young lady come into my office to talk about a relationship that she had enjoyed for a while and things were escalating. She plopped down in the chair in my office and announced, “Well...we’re dating.” I told her how happy I was for her and if she’d mind if I asked her a couple of questions. “What is different today that wasn’t true of you last night?” “Hmmm,” she thought, “Well, I guess now, we are only dating each other.” I replied, “But that was true yesterday. This guy is the only one you have seen for almost a month now. What I am asking is what has *changed* between the two of you?” She looked confused. “Let me make it easier on you, what if, let’s say, a month, or a year from now you met someone in whom you were interested and you wanted to go out with them, what would you do?” “Well,” she said hesitantly, “I guess we’d have to break up.”

This is the key to understanding what “dating” is. The relationship has become, in my words, *institutionalized*. In other words, what was (the evening before) a matter of one’s free choice is now a RULE. Young people will describe this as a “commitment,” or say that they have gotten “serious.” Again, VERY rarely is there any kind of reflection on this conversation, but inevitably, it always accompanies a great sense of relief on the part of both individuals. And their newfound confidence shows in their face.

- Fifth, the relationship enters a honeymoon of sorts. This is the time of blissful enjoyment of one another. Usually mass amounts of time are spent with one another (very often to the exclusion of other friends. This is never self-conscious, just assumed to be the way things have to be.) Almost without fail, this is the period of physical escalation as well. What used to be acceptable physical behavior is now wide open in their minds. Kissing will escalate into passionate kissing. Passionate kissing will usually escalate into compromising positions (lying down on the couch together, etc.) The sky is the limit on physical escalation but is only controlled by the conscience of one or both of the partners. But again, the FACT of their physical involvement is NEVER questioned. “We are dating,” is the only justification.
- Six, the relationship experiences it’s first conflict. This can come in a variety of forms. If one of the two individuals suffers from insecurity, it may come when the partner breaks an unwritten rule. The scene goes this way:
 There is an awkward period of silence from one or the other followed by the question, “What’s wrong?”
 “Nothing,” they say.
 “C’mon,” they reply, “tell me.”
 “It’s just that at the party tonight, you hardly talked to me. You spent the whole time over there with your friends and it was just like I was any other person. I felt stupid. I’m not asking for a whole lot, just a little attention every now and then.”

This is usually followed by an apology of sorts along with a promise to do better next time. But as with every other phase of the relationship, whether or not the expectation of the other person was valid is NEVER questioned. It is usually just thought to be part of what it means to have a dating partner.

For some relationships, these conflicts can be the death of the couple. If one person has maintained enough personal confidence to weather the storm of arguments and “fights,” they very well may simply tell the person that they don’t want to date anymore, but this is rare. Usually, these conflicts simply deepen the sense of obligation and ownership between the two of them.

The rest of the relationship is fairly straight forward. Either the conflict subsides and the couple finds a way to peacefully co-exist OR they grow tired of each other and throw in the towel. But the “breaking up” ritual has its own set of rules. First, almost inevitably, the decision to “break up” is not mutual. Though this is often claimed by one or both of the parties involved, it rarely explains the forlorn looks and depressed feelings that they feel at the loss. Second, if the person who was broken up with is desperate enough, they may try some way to “get them back.” Without fail, these desperate attempts fail and in fact serve only to deepen the sense of separation between them. One party will call late at night when the feelings of loneliness are especially vivid or when they have seen the other on out with someone else.

This pain is VERY real and VERY potent. The feeling of hurt and resentment has the ability to produce almost ANY kind of shamelessness in order to get some relief. Stalking, calling at all hours of the night, leaving desperate notes where they will find them, or even suicidal thoughts are not uncommon during these breakups. And in some cases, sadly enough, this approach actually “works.” The other person begins to question why they broke up with them in the first place. They decide to “give it one more try.” This almost never ends well. The VAST majority of these “try again” attempts meet with the exact same frustration. The partner falls right back into the same relationship destroying patterns that they used to and they have to break up again. This can be done countless times.

But there is something that may appear strange that happens when the “broken up with” finally gets over themselves. And practically anything can be the impetus for this. Perhaps they rediscover their friends and really enjoy doing things with them. Perhaps they meet someone else in whom they are interested. It may be that the person simply wakes up one day and says to themselves, “I have GOT to get over this person and stop acting like a fool.” Either way, they stop pursuing the other person. Almost without fail, when the person who initially did the breaking up sees or hears about the other person’s new found confidence, they feel a certain sense of attachment to them. They rarely will admit it to themselves, but they look at the person differently with more respect and may very well admit to their friends that they regret that things ended the way in which they did. This is a KEY event that deserves more explanation later.

The bottom line through all this is that there is almost never any real resolution that takes place between the two. It is not uncommon for them to always feel a sense of nostalgia or even regret at how things went. The attendant heartache and awkwardness remains usually without ever questioning WHY their emotions were so destroyed in the process.

What is going on here? The age old questions about dating have never really been answered by Christian writers. Typically, Christian books on dating focus on one or two options for being a Christian and dating in this world. First, the literature goes the *morality* route. Christian self-help books on “Ten Rules for Dating” and “The Ten Commandments for Dating” abound. The idea being, if the proper boundaries are put in place and committed to, most couples can go through dating unscathed.

Other books go the Christian *retreat* route. This is typical of fundamentalistic reactionism which assumes that since the enterprise is fraught with sin, then it must be, therefore, irredeemable. The baby is then thrown out with the bathwater and the individual is encouraged to “kiss dating goodbye” or something of a sort. Christian singleness is vaulted as a superior way of living (“If it’s good enough for the Apostle Paul...”).

But it must be stressed that neither of these options have questioned the assumptions inherent in any of these relationships. It is the premise of this paper that what is really lacking in the Christian discussion of dating is NOT a lack of rules NOR a lack of Christian retreat-ism. Rather what has not yet been discussed is the nature of relationships themselves and the roles that single men and women must understand before they begin to date. MUCH is being assumed in our day and must be reexamined.

First, it must be granted that in the most foundational of ways, there are only three possible definitions of the relationship between a single man and a single woman. Taking our cue from the relational definition inherent in the Trinity and therefore in man in the image of God, we see that it is inevitable that these definitions exist. And taking our cue from the distinctiveness of the roles in the members of the Trinity, we see that there are behaviors that are appropriate for each definition.

Definition	Appropriate Behavior
Father	Eternally Begetting
Son	Eternally Begotten
Spirit	Proceeding from the Father and Son

In single relationships, it must be stressed that the “definition” of the relationship is simply a way of talking about the individuals’ *intentions* in the relationships. Where is this relationship going? What is its purpose? When you answer that question, you have “defined the relationship.” It is my conviction that there are only THREE conceivable definitions of any relationship between a single man and a single woman.

Definition #1: Friends

As straightforward as this definition seems, there is typically nothing more hard to define than what is meant by “we are just friends.” Since this phrase is usually uttered as a thinly veiled rejection, it is not always received as it should be. But the individual who says it simply means that there is nothing more from the relationship that is desired from the relationship than what it is in its most basic form. In other words, the person is a fellow human being, perhaps a brother or sister “in Christ.” But the intentions for the relationship go no further than a relationship with a biological brother or sister in Christ.

Therefore, the “rules” or “appropriate behavior” for friends should reflect this intention. For instance, it would be inappropriate for someone to refer to someone as their “friend” and then engage in sexual activity with them. Why? Because sex, in God’s design, was made to be sacramental in the sense that it communicates a spiritual and social reality through a physical act. When a man and woman engage in sex, *whether they acknowledge it or not*, they are creating bonds, because sex was designed to be a pledge of all the things that make up an intimate relationship of marriage. In other words, when I am WITH my spouse in that way, I am saying that I am also “with her” emotionally, socially, psychologically, spiritually, and economically. Therefore, when sex is pursued outside of this intention, it is fundamentally a lie. And usually a nagging sense of wrongness about the act remains.

This issue must be pursued further for no other reason than the recent growth of the relational phenomena called “Friends with Benefits.” In a May 2004 *New York Times* article, Benoit Denizet-Lewis detailed this rising trend in an article called, “Friends, Friends With Benefits and the Benefits of the Local Mall.” In it, he traced the lives of a handful of young teenagers who

were experts, by this time, on the trend. The idea was simple: let's have the sex without any of the complications of a relationship. We can do whatever we like together sexually and then go on our merry way. The first half of the article sound like a teenage boy's ultimate fantasy, but the last half pulls back the curtain on what's really going on.

Setting aside for the moment the cold reality that "friends with benefits" is a male dominated, male manufactured, and male controlled arrangement, Denizet-Lewis found that for all the light-heartedness that surrounded these trysts, underneath the surface was a gnawing sense of alienation, hurt, and cynicism about sexuality in general.

Like other high-school girls I talked to, Melissa says she doesn't see why boys get to have "all the fun," although during the few months we communicated, it was clear that Melissa's hookups rarely brought her joy. She complained often about being depressed and her hookups, which she hoped would make her feel better, usually left her feeling worse. But a few days after a hookup, she would have forgotten that they tended to make her miserable, and would tell me excitedly about a new boy she was planning to meet. When that boy failed to show or called to say he was running an hour late, Melissa's spirits would sink -- again.

What "Melissa" doesn't seem to understand is that sexuality comes with its own bond-making chemistry. In 1 Corinthians 7:16, Paul says, "Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, 'The two will become one flesh.'" In other words, to suppose that you can hold sexuality in a purely platonic, detached way is hopelessly naïve at best and wildly destructive at worst.

Why? Simply because relationships come with appropriate behaviors, some of which are more obvious than others. But it is always true that when the lines of appropriateness are crossed in any relationship, what results is dysfunction. For instance, when a parent crosses the clear line of sexual appropriateness in their relationship with their children, a host of untold personal, emotional and psychological horrors results. Likewise, any couple who assumes that they can handle sexuality in general in a casual way is just as likely to be surprised as the miner who assumes he can handle casually the dynamite he uses to blast his way through the mine.

Therefore, when a relationship between a single man and single woman is understood to be that of "friends" then both are obligated to live in that definition in a way that is appropriate.

Definition #2: Engaged

Fairly straightforward, this definition happens when two individuals decide on one another. It must be stressed here that the decision is what is central. Love does not happen to you; you decide to do it. It is not like a ditch that you fall into; it is a promise that you make to "have and to hold 'till death you do part." When a couple makes this decision, they have decided to forge ahead and be married without any understandable delay.

Again, it is clear from this definition that there are certain appropriate behaviors that accompany the definition. For instance, having pledged myself to one person, it would be inappropriate to be engaging in a overly emotional, overly intimate relationship with someone else other than the one to whom I am engaged. It is always a frightening prospect to hear from a single person who is dating that, "I am dating so-and-so, but so-and-so is the one I can really talk to about anything. I can tell them all kinds of things that just can't tell the person I'm dating." (It amazes me that this is usually said with a straight face.) In other words, when the decision to forsake all others is

made, that means that the emotional and social bonds that used to characterize OTHER relationships must be broken.

Definition #3: I'm Not Ready

Aside from the “friends with benefits” issue, the first two definitions we covered are usually fairly straightforward and come with a fair amount of intuition in the minds of most single people. We instinctively know what it means when she says, “I just want to be friends,” OR “I want to marry you.” However, 90% of most dating relationships fall into a far different category. For lack of a better term (and I am open to suggestions), most relationships fall into what I call the “I'm Not Ready” (INR) definition.

Again, the issue of intention is central here. You are in the INR definition when you are interested in the individual on *some* level (that level is quite immaterial, in fact, but is rarely ever realized by the one who is interested), but you are not ready to say that you want to be engaged to them yet. In other words, if I am interested in someone enough to want to ask them out on a date, and they are willing to do the same, then we are in the INR definition. Clearly the vast majority of relationships fall under this category, and the definition, on paper, is not complicated at all. It simply has to be determined if the person who is being *dated* is willing to have the *dater* continue to ask them out. Simple enough?

Not quite. Where the difficulty arises is the moment in which the question of “appropriate behaviors” comes up. What is appropriate behavior for these couples? What kinds of limits ought they to put on themselves as they presumably grow closer to the individual they are dating? (Clearly, the way in which dating mostly occurs now, there are NO limits that are placed on the kind of emotional, social, and sexual access that they couple has with each other.)

To state it simply: it is my conviction that if a couple is unwilling (for whatever reason) to commit to marrying the person with whom they are in relationship, then it is not appropriate for either of them to ACT as if they have ‘rights’ over what the other person does, feels, thinks, or says. In other words, the core of the problem with dating, as I see it, is that relationships that are not presently heading towards marriage are being lived as if they are. Expectations, assumptions, and a sense of ownership are all being imported into the relationship without there being any covenantal reason to do so.

At this point, I can only appeal to close to 20 years of experience in youth ministry which have shown me what have been a large variety of relationships that are more or less healthy. In other words, the healthiest relationships (which have in turn resulted in the most joy-filled, fulfilling marriages) have always had a number of things which were carefully avoided in the relationship.

Rules

By “rules” in dating, I mean the almost always untold laws that must be followed by one or the other partner. The partner is almost always not aware of these rules until they have broken them. “Why didn’t you call me for three days?” she asks. “Why were you talking to that guy at the party and not to me?” he says. These rules are usually forged in the fires of insecurity, but are easily cloaked in the language of “what-any-relationship-ought-to-look-like.” In other words, the rules of the relationship are applied because the

person is afraid of what might happen to the relationship if the other person does not get in step with proper dating protocol.

Expectations

“Why don’t you do the kind of sweet things for me that so-and-so does for his girlfriend?” Expectations are usually rarely ever stated from the beginning of the relationship mostly because the person doesn’t know they exist. Perhaps a conversation with a sorority sister will cause her to wonder, “Why doesn’t he do those kinds of things?” Suddenly, the boyfriend suffers by comparison and is expected to change his behavior or the threat of a breakup ensues.

Assumptions

“What do you mean you are going to have a ‘weekend with the girls’? I didn’t plan anything for this weekend because I assumed we were doing something,” he says. Assumptions function in a relationship as the sum total of all the desires that a person ever had for whom they would date. They are usually justified by saying something along the lines of, “well, I just have high standards for the people I date.” (What is never questioned is NOT that you have standards, but why you suppose you have to right to enforce those standards on the person you are dating. But more on this in a moment.)

Ownership

In its most ugly form, these assumptions are communicated in a way which seems to imply that the person’s expectations are completely legitimate. When you make a “commitment” to dating, then these kinds of things are just what dating is all about. You do not have the right to do whatever you want to do, you are obliged to follow my wishes. I, in a sense, OWN you for the time in which we are dating. Therefore, I have the right to ask for these things. This is the only explanation for the shock that is experienced when these expectations are not met.

Demandingness

This is the spirit of ownership. When I owe something, I assume I have the right to demand the kinds of behavior that will make me happy. This un-confessed sense shows that most dating relationships are wildly and unapologetically selfish. If the relationship is not serving MY needs and bringing me MY happiness, then it isn’t worth keeping together. Why do we wonder at divorce rates among American Christians when this attitude dominates our dating?

Exclusivity

It is very easy to be understood at this point. Many Christian writers have argued that problems happen whenever the couple is alone and, therefore, they ought to never allow themselves to BE alone. They must always be dating other people. But this is not what I mean by exclusivity. If a couple simply doesn’t want to date anyone else at that time, then fine. But it is when this exclusivity becomes institutionalized, or it becomes a ‘rule’ that problems start. Date only one another if you want, but the healthiest of relationships have avoided the *demand* that we only date each other.

The unpleasant side of all these characteristics is the typical way in which punishments are meted out in the dating relationship. In other words, if you break the rules, then you have to deal with the consequences, which come down in a variety of forms. There is the infamous “cold shoulder” routine. (“What’s wrong?” she says. “Nothing.” He snaps. “Why are you being so quiet?” he says. “No reason,” she says sullenly.) There is the inevitable pouting, the dour face, the disappointed glances, the hurt looks. Then finally comes the “fight.” I have seen “discussions” about the appropriate or inappropriateness of one or the other’s partner go on for DAYS in a college context. The more exuberant of couples have been known to yell, scream, throw things around a room and even, in some pathological cases, resort to physical violence. Others will sit in silence over a meal until such a time as they can burst into tears (girls AND guys) when they get in the car or get home.

On another point, hopefully, by now, it will be clear why the problem of sex is EVER-PRESENT in college relationships. It matters NOT if you are Christian or otherwise, sexuality is going to be a stumbling block in your relationship. But hopefully it will also be clear that the cause of this sexual struggle cannot simply be chalked up to “overactive hormones.” I, for one, have greatly tired of hearing sexual misconduct among dating couples blamed on hormonal changes and inevitable chemistry, science which I find dubious at best. Rather, I would argue, that the reason why premature sexuality is so rampant among college students today is because they are living as if they are in a ‘play pretend’ marriage. And when it feels like marriage, it ought to come with the appropriate sexual privileges as well.

Christian college students admit without blushing to behaviors that only years ago would have been thought unthinkable. In my years in campus ministry, I have heard Christian students attempts to justify everything from sleeping together in the same bed to oral sex.

But again, the point of this, is not to rail on the fact that sexuality is out of control, but to stress that there was a ‘relational soup’ created, if you will, that *set the couple up* for these kinds of problems. Their failure in the area of Christian purity was approaching inevitable when the assumptions about modern dating were honored. It is NO USE to rail against the lack of chastity among Christian students without railing equally against the structures that made those failures VERY likely. You failed sexually with your Christian partner because, in many ways, you were set up to fail by not thinking through the nature of your relationship.

It is this author’s contention that ANY kind of sexual expression in dating is fundamentally a lie (passionate kissing notwithstanding). NOT because the God of the Bible is anti-sex. Far from it. But rather because the definition inherent in a dating relationship cannot sustain the deep bonds that are created in sex. If we are ever to deal with the wanton sexuality pervasive on college campuses today, more than mere moralisms will have to be applied to the situation in order to give a leg up to our Christian students. And retreat from the dating ritual altogether is simply a reactionistic folly.

It should be immediately noticed that each of these characteristics that I suggest should be avoided in relationships are all essentially the same thing. And it boils down to the issue of “rights.” I am convicted that if I am dating someone, I have NO RIGHTS to their time, their

talents, their money, their affection, their attitudes, even their behavior. I cannot demand ANYTHING from them that will be gained by my own manipulation.

To press the issue for the sake of driving this point home, I would argue that I do not even have the “right” to demand that the individual that I am dating be moral. If the person that I am dating decides to act in a way that is ungodly or immoral, I do not have the right to engage in a long exercise of manipulation in order to bring them around to compliance.

At this point, there is an inevitable objection. “But what you are suggesting is that we are doormats. You are giving carte blanche to abusive relationships where couples use and abuse each other with no sense of retribution.” But I mean nothing of a sort. And it is remarkable how obvious the answer is and yet how rarely it is ever considered. If the person you are dating is acting like a jerk, the simple answer to “what to do about it” is...don’t ask them out anymore (OR say ‘no’ when you are asked out by them). In other words, there is NOTHING that is forcing you to be in a relationship with anyone whose morals you question. Dating is, by definition, a temporary thing. And if you find that your standards for whom you wish to date is not being met...then stop going out with them. It’s as simple as that.

Or is it?

The most profound observance that I have had of college dating relationships is the fact that the desire to maintain the relationship is so strong, that the thought of ending it is the most to be feared. There are few things worse in the mind of a college student than the thought of being rejected in a dating relationship. But rather than rail on the insecurity of our young people in college, I would rather emphasize that this fact merely demonstrates what we have been saying since the first.

Our desire to be in relationship is formatted on our spiritual DNA. We are covenantally made and nurtured. We make bonds with one another that are either life-giving and vibrant or soul-crushing and dead. When we date, we are bearing witness to something that is not only natural in the human heart, but something that is reflective of the very nature of God himself. We long to connect with one another in meaningful ways because our God is connected to himself in an infinitely meaningful way.

Therefore, the only hope for the Christian student in the midst of all these factors is to enter the experience of dating cloaked in the confidence that only his/her relationship with Jesus can give. They must be wed to Christ before they can look to wed another. NOT for some fundamentalistic expression of pseudo-spirituality, but because it takes that kind of confidence in Christ to say to the person in whom we are interested, “I like being with you. I like seeing you. But we both know that this thing can only end in one of two ways: either we break up or we get married. Therefore, let’s pretend that we are grown up enough in Christ to say to one another that we are going to survive this if it doesn’t work out. and let’s stop worrying about what will happen and just enjoy the time that God has given us together for what it is...just that.”

These are the relationships that I believe are the most healthy.

So what does this all look like in practice? Hopefully, it will not be too hard to imagine Tom and Sarah who met when they first came to college through freshman orientation. After a year and a half or so of just getting settled on all the many questions that have to be faced early on in college (what's my major, what's my crowd, what's my schedule, etc.) the two of them began to spend time in very similar circles. Somewhere before the end of their sophomore year, Tom got up the courage to ask Sarah to out to dinner together where they both had a great time.

The two exchanged phone numbers and began to call each other on a semi-regular basis, sometimes just to talk, and sometimes to talk about going out again. Which they did. However, the summer break interrupted their relationship before either of them could be certain as to what was really "going on" between them. They made a decision, therefore, to avoid stressing one another out over the break by trying to see each other. Sarah was studying abroad for the summer and Tom was interning at his father's accounting firm. The two emailed probably once a week during the summer just to keep in touch and engage in some low grade flirtatiousness (as flirtatious as email can be...ahem).

When their junior year approached, neither of the two had lost any interest in each other. Both had many friends in common who were asking all kinds of questions about what was going to happen to them this semester. Tom continued to call Sarah the first week of school and the two went out after that. When Sarah got home that night, she sat down with her roommates for the evening "grilling." "What did he say?" "Does he like you?" "Are you going to start dating him?" were just a few of the questions she fielded. Sarah, though vaguely uncomfortable with the pressure she felt from the questions decided that she needed to know what to think of what was happening.

It must be said at this point, that Sarah's mild frustration is entirely normal. At this stage, she has no grid through which to view Tom's actions. What does his calling, and their flirting, and their going out MEAN? What she craves in her frustration is what every person craves when they start to date...a definition through which she can understand and interpret Tom's advances.

The next night on the phone, Sarah was visibly distant and not very interested in talking too long. Tom picked up on the vibe right away and gracefully allowed her out of the conversation. Tom hung up the phone and knew that he and Sarah were having much to good a time together for her to suddenly change her mind. She was not the sort to be that fickle. So he decided to ask her about it the next day.

Tom text messaged Sarah and asked her if she wouldn't mind meeting him for coffee the next afternoon. The two met in a quiet coffee shop to talk. Tom opened up the conversation by saying that he had notice that Sarah was really distracted on the phone the other night, and that it had occurred to him, on the advice of his father, that he needed to tell Sarah what he was thinking about the two of them. Tom grinned like a kid as he talked about how much fun he was having with Sarah and that he wanted very much to keep seeing her. He also added that he because of some mistakes that he had made in high school (and seen his fraternity brothers make), he was vaguely nervous about entering to an overly-committed intense relationship with

anybody. But that he wanted only to have the enjoyment of being able to talk and do things with Sarah.

Sarah was more than happy to oblige Tom's request to keep seeing her. She too had been burned before on relationships that had gotten too intense too fast. So the two of them agreed that though they were clearly interested, they would "take it slow."

From that point on, they did nothing of a sort. It was really hard to maintain other interests that Fall. The two of them saw each other almost every day and certainly talked or emailed or text-ed every day. By the time Thanksgiving came around, Tom and Sarah were clearly a couple, at least in the eyes of their friends. And their friends genuinely enjoyed being around them. The two of them rarely sat together when others were around. And they avoided the temptation to engage in "public displays of affection" when others were around because of the tendency to put those around them off.

One night that December, in a light hearted moment, Tom and Sarah were joking about the kinds of names that they did or didn't like. At one moment, Tom said, "Well, we'll just have to name our kids something normal, right?" Sarah laughed and let it go, but the truth was that she was completely freaked out by the comment. She was having a great time, sure. But marriage was such a big commitment and there was SO MUCH she felt she didn't know about Tom that she just couldn't stand the pressure she felt trying to think about it.

This is a myth, by the way, of college relationships. The amount of information that you need to know about the person you are dating is FAR less than what most think it is. This is evidenced by the relative speed with which folks get engaged AFTER they graduate from college. They find it simply doesn't take near as long after they are out of the realm of college. But the truth is: the time it takes to find out what one "needs to know" in order to know if they are a potential partner is not near what college students think it is.

Sarah got very distant at this point. Tom was great, sure, and she could see herself marrying him...maybe, but she was no where near wanting to think about those kinds of questions. Not only that, but she had recently been introduced to the brother of one her roommates who had come into town just the week before and had stayed up to talk with his sister and her roommates. Sarah found herself completely charmed by the guy and even made some flirtatious advances that few in the room noticed except herself.

But when she climbed into bed that night she wondered, "What did that mean?" Now, two weeks later and Tom was putting on the "hard sell" trying to bring up the topic of them getting married (which, of course, he never even thought of mentioning...it was nothing more than an innocent joke). Sarah spent the next two weeks in a fog and was beginning to get annoyed with the slightest things that Tom did wrong.

Tom, meanwhile, was largely oblivious to the whole affair and didn't think much of Sarah's distance lately, but merely chalked it up to end of the semester stress with exams. It took him totally by surprise when, after exams were over, and school was closing up for the winter holidays that Sarah called wanting to talk to him.

She explained that she felt like things were running too fast. She said that their promise to take it slow at the beginning of the semester had been completely disregarded by both of them and that she was feeling the pressure to think about things that she didn't want to think about. Tom was very much on his heels and put up a small fight wondering from where she was feeling the pressure. She then asked him what he meant when he was talking a few weeks ago about "our children." Tom laughed out loud and said that he had meant it only as a joke. Sarah explained that it didn't matter; she just wanted to back off some and rethink what they were doing together.

The ride home for Tom was miserable. The truth was that he had indeed been thinking that Sarah could be "The One" and that he would start in a few months thinking about how to bring that up with her. But at the same time, he was deeply annoyed, because, by Sarah's own admission, it was nothing that he was doing that was making her feel this way, besides a thoughtless remark about a yet non-existent future. It didn't seem fair to him to have the relationship end over something that he didn't even do.

In his grief over the next few days, Tom grew more and more irritated at Sarah's reaction and determined to set it straight. Tom called Sarah and told her that he absolutely had to speak to her as soon as possible. Sarah reluctantly agreed, thinking that it was going to take it a while to get through to this guy that she was ready to move on...or so she thought.

Tom drove the next day the hour and a half to Sarah's family home and the two went out to eat a local fast food restaurant. Tom began by asking for a favor of Sarah. He asked if they could determine from then on to only judge where their relationship was going on the basis of what THEY heard from each other, NOT on what they THOUGHT they heard from each other. Communication was worth the try, he argued, and it would be tragic if the two of them missed a chance to enjoy more time together over a stupid misunderstanding.

Second, Tom told Sarah that he had no intention of even thinking of talking about marriage with Sarah. They were simply doing exactly what he said he was doing from the very beginning of their relationship: spending time with one another and having fun. Tom went on to say that he knew he had no rights to force Sarah to think about anything she wasn't ready to talk about. And as if to punctuate the point, he told her that he didn't even have the right to ask her not to go out with anyone else, that she was free at all times to do whatever she wanted to do with him, either say 'yes' when he calls to ask her out on a date, or say 'no.' It was her choice, but it would be a deep, wide tragedy for the two of them to end their time together over Sarah thinking that Tom was getting pushy.

Sarah had never had any guy talk to her this way. Usually, when some of her other relationships had gotten to this point, the guy tightened up and tried to oblige himself to her even more. But Tom had ended the conversation by saying that he still would love to keep seeing her on those terms, if she was willing. Still a little stunned and wondering if Tom was just up to something, Sarah agreed that he could call her if he wanted to...but that she might not be available if he did.

Tom rode the way home dejected and depressed. He had said what he wanted to say and walked away with what he thought was his dignity, but he still despaired for their future. That night,

Tom got home and emailed Sarah some of the same things he had said to her in their meeting and as Sarah read the note, she was glad to hear that she had been wrong about feeling the pressure, but she still was very unsure about jumping back into things too quickly. Besides, she thought, her roommate had already set her up with her cute brother when she found out that she had told Tom to slow down.

Just as he promised, Tom called three or four days later just to check and see how Sarah was doing. Sarah was actually glad to hear from him and had to admit to herself that she had missed their conversations. Tom decided to take the dive and ask Sarah out to dinner for the next weekend. It was a long drive but there was a great restaurant he wanted her to go to very near where she lived.

Sarah froze on the phone realizing that Tom had asked her out for the very night she was going on a blind date with her roommate's brother. Sarah took a deep breath and decided it was best to be honest and just came right out with the fact that she had a date with her roommate's brother.

It's important to notice that at this very point, Tom stands at a crossroads. And it matters not ONE bit what his motives or 'true' feelings are. He KNOWS what he ought to do, but he also knows what he wants to do. Is Tom being disingenuous with his feelings if he says what he knows he NEEDS to say rather than what he wants to say? Rather than being an example of dishonesty, this is actually an example of loving a person the way they ought to be loved...that is, with what is right rather than with what you feel.

Tom took a deep breath and said the opposite of what he wanted to say. He said that he had heard of this guy and very brightly said that he and Sarah would have a great time together. He added that he knew Sarah and her roommate were very close and that it would be fun to double date with a crowd like that. Tom worked with all his might to not let slip even the slightest hint of disappointment in his voice. He was totally positive without being gushing and supportive without sounding suspicious. Tom told Sarah that he'd try again "next time." The two made some more small talk and hung up the phone.

While Tom was again trying to convince himself that at least he had not made a fool of himself, Sarah was baffled. For the strangest reason, she had wished that Tom hadn't wanted to get off the phone. She even began to wonder why she was doing this at all. Why had she called things off with Tom? Why had she gotten so bent out of shape over the whole thing?

Next weekend, Tom was sitting on his couch watching late night TV when the phone rang...it was Sarah. When she asked what he was doing, Tom answered shortly but immediately asked where she was. She said she had gotten home from her date a little after 10 o'clock and just wondered what he was up to. And Tom knew he had done the right thing. They talked until 2am.

Needless to say, Tom and Sarah were "back on" for the next Spring. But Tom had learned a valuable lesson. The more freedom and space he gave Sarah, the closer she wanted to be to him. Tom determined that he would assume NOTHING in his relationship with Sarah, and committed himself to keeping their relationship open at all times. Sarah would periodically struggle with

her feelings for Tom, but Tom would always meet her with the same refrain about her having complete freedom to date whomever she wanted to and be with whomever she wanted. That Spring, Sarah had to break one of their dates because she had been invited on a girls weekend outing to a large nearby city. Tom actually was able to be excited for her, telling her that she'd have a great time. Sarah found it hard all weekend to enjoy it since Tom wasn't there.

Tom and Sarah also found that the climate that had been created for their relationship helped tremendously with their struggle to maintain some sanity in their sexual lives. With the two of them growing so close, it was only natural that there were regular intense evenings when the two of them did FAR more than they ever intended to do before marriage. However, what always struck Sarah after these mistakes happened was the fact that Tom was always talking about her having the freedom to date whomever she pleased. It didn't take her long to realize that Tom assumed that HE had the very same freedom. The thought of Tom being with someone else just galled her and helped her tremendously in maintaining a sense of self-control when the evening was clearly over. It was a bit easier for the two of them to keep to their original agreement to limit their physical contact with each other to innocent kisses.

By the time the next Fall came around, Sarah and Tom were openly talking about getting married. That Thanksgiving, Tom gave her a ring and she said 'yes.' They would be married next summer. But throughout the whole engagement, Tom found that his commitment to respect Sarah's time and freedom paid the richest dividends. Tom found it unnatural to assume that any of the wedding preparations were "her job." Sarah found that she needed to re-think everything when she was with Tom and not just assume that the way she grew up doing certain tasks was the right way. The two agreed that the greatest thing that had ever happened to them was stumbling across this great fact: that relationships grow the best when they remain the most free.