

Purpose-Filled Relationships

Couples choose old-fashioned courtship ideals to place an emphasis on emotional and spiritual growth over physical satisfaction before marriage.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - Today, Sept. 19, is their wedding day and they will kiss on the lips for the first time.

Ryan Bracken, 22, of Mount Joy, and Dawn Moore, 23, of Gordonville, will be married at 2 p.m. at Pheasant Run Farms Bed & Breakfast.

Their decision to avoid kissing and the temptation for further sexual contact was a difficult one to uphold, they said.

But each had suffered emotional scars of past relationships-gone-bad. And this time, they decided, they were going to be purposeful. They were going to build their relationship with one another slowly, thoughtfully, and respectfully; and, they said, with God as their primary love.

"Purposeful relationship" is an old concept turned new.

Fueled by bestseller Joshua Harris' "I Kissed Dating Goodbye," and its sequel, "Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship," the principle of purposeful dating is rippling among our young adults if not in practice, at least in discussion.

A purposeful relationship, according to Harris, distinguishes between "undefined and directionless romance" and "a romantic relationship that is purposefully headed towards marriage." It's an intriguing choice for young people who live in this modern, hypersexualized society where casual sex ("hooking up") is, for many people, just something fun to do, with no promises or commitments; where children live in homes in which parents rotate through multiple sex partners; where the media has a field day with the sexual philanderings of a former president; where pornography is just a computer click away; and where sexual images and innuendo are used to try to sell products that are as diverse as laundry detergent, cars and, well, Viagra.

Those who choose purposeful dating, or "courtship," choose to reject the "I-want-it-now" and instead focus on patience. Instead of swiftly indulging in carnal pleasures, they choose to live within "moral boundaries" that, they believe, will lead to healthier, more joy-filled relationships.

Purposeful relationships, they say, are more likely to lead to deeper emotional and intellectual connections. They honor the belief that physical intimacy is designed for marriage; and that marriage is a sacred commitment, not something to do until one tires of it.

"Both of our parents have been through divorces," Dawn said. "For him, it was his dad that left. For me, it was my mom. So we both had that hole." And, Dawn and Ryan said, they'd both endured the emotional pain of their own more-contemporary relationships with others, unions which had soured.

So, a couple of years ago, individually, and not yet knowing one another, Dawn and Ryan looked to what their faith traditions taught about men, women and love. They each chose to try to lead their lives in a manner that they felt would honor God.

The Purple Door

Dawn, who works as a scheduler for business coaches at Action International, is a graduate of Greenwood (Del.)

Mennonite School. "For me," she said, "I've been in church all my life. I knew, all my life, right from wrong ...

"But I got myself into a situation ... or two ... where I pretty much ignored what I knew was right and I followed my own desires. It drew me away from church and brought me into a whole lot of messes ...

"I was living for myself, and I was collapsing into myself. I had no purpose, no structure," Dawn explained.

She'd been living with a man who was wrong for her, she said; but, for a long time, she was "just too weak to get out of it." Ultimately, she did leave him. But, a month later, in April of 2001, she was "in a car wreck," she said, "that broke the left side of my body.

"It was a physical crushing, and an emotional ending of myself and the beginning of my surrender to God." Ryan's experience, he shared, was the lingering hurt of off-and-on relationships, and the searing sense of rejection he's carried with him since age 2, when his biological father divorced his mother.

A graduate of Living Word Academy and currently a student at Harrisburg Area Community College, Ryan works in industrial cleaning for I.K. Stoltzfus in Mount Joy.

He said his about-face came in his senior year of high school. He had been playing bass guitar with his church worship team "and smoking weed." His stepfather heard about it, and the two of them had a heart-to-heart talk. "He didn't scold me," Ryan said. "He just shared with me. And, we asked each other, at the end of that, for the forgiveness for all of the past rejection." But he credits his mom for the prayers that led him to his choice to live his life for God's glory. "Her heart was always for me to be the best," he said.

He did mission work in Colorado in 2001; and, at the same time, still unknown to one another, Dawn was doing mission work in Ireland.

Then, in August of 2002, Ryan and Dawn both attended a Purple Door Christian music festival. Ryan was manning a Youth With a Mission concession stand; as Dawn browsed, the two talked. They met again in the crowd, a second day, and talked some more.

They exchanged phone numbers, and then stories.

With the help and guidance of mentors from their churches, hers in Greenwood and his at The Worship Center, they decided to proceed toward a relationship, with purpose and with boundaries.

The premise, Ryan said, is that "boundaries create structure. Structure creates stability. Without structure and stability, buildings collapse." If they were going to build a relationship, he said, they didn't want it to collapse."

'A gift of purity'

Matt Weaver, 25, of Lancaster, said he was trying to help young people from his church build on their own potential to be the best they could be, when he was recently reminded of "the condition of the world" and its cavalier attitudes about sexual relationships.

He was leading a book study with some high school students and young adults at a park in Millersville, discussing "Wild At Heart" by John Eldredge.

"Some young boys I would guess about fourth or fifth grade who were on their bikes, stopped and asked us what we were doing," Matt related. "We said we were discussing what it means to be a man.

"Then we asked those boys, "What do you think it means to be a man?" " And one of the boys responded, in graphic language, that a boy becomes a man when he is the recipient of oral sex.

A sense of sadness swept over Matt. "In today's society," he observed, "for every guy it's about "getting laid' ... Boys are growing up watching TV and thinking that ... is what it means to be a man. In today's society you are told that whatever you want is right. Well, that's not correct. ... Our hearts are not made to be broken by our bad decisions.

"I slept with people I dated," Matt admitted.

"As a teenager, I was always looking for women," he said. "I was always buying clothes, trying to look good.

Comparing myself to others: "Am I better than that guy?" I was insecure which is the opposite of what being "the man" should be.

"All those years I wasted trying to hook up. It was a waste. I wasted it." He met Mary Cote, in April of 2003, through their brothers who serve in the Marine Corps together in Iraq. By that time Matt had been living a life "rededicated to the Lord" and was ready for something better, he said.

A Garden Spot High School graduate, Matt is a mechanic who works on aircraft propellers. Mary, 26, a graduate of Lancaster Mennonite High School and a Millersville University student, teaches high school English at Living Word Academy.

Matt was Mary's first and only boyfriend.

This past February, less than a year after they met, they were married sharing their first kiss at the altar in front of 350 wedding guests.

"The decision to wait to kiss was largely Matt's," Mary noted, "because he had had a lot of 'experience' before me. He would always say that I was his 'gift' a gift he wanted to wait to unwrap in its entirety after we were wed.

"Honestly," she elaborated via e-mail, "he was the guard/gatekeeper of the physical side of our relationship. While we didn't kiss, we did hold hands, hug, and were physically affectionate. As a man, Matt knew his limits (and his past), and, therefore, was very careful with what we did ..." Although, Mary said, it is possible to court and kiss, "it is, I believe, safer to wait," she said. "It didn't hurt us; in fact, it built the expectation and excitement. Matt could hardly wait. Denying yourself of something delays gratification and makes the wait more worth it. Matt focused on protecting and honoring my virtue rather than exploiting it." The daughter of Joyce and the Rev. Steve Cote, pastor at Zion Church of Millersville, Mary said she was nurtured to choose friendships that allowed her to honor God first, avoiding situations that might compromise that.

After she met Matt, she admitted, "there were times when this became legalistic. They were rules, rather than motivations from the heart. But I don't think the true spirit is to be legalistic ...

"At first, I was so stressed out, just trying to discern if it's God's will (to be in a courtship with Matt). I worked myself into this massive tension. And then my older brother Mark asked me "Mary, do you like him?" And I said, "Yes.' And he said. "Go for it." " It was then that she could accept that purposeful relationships "have to do more with motivations and intentions," she said. "It's esteeming the other above yourself ..." "As a man," Matt said, "we are made to be jealous of our wife's love. I've been in relationships where girls have given away the gift before I've been with them. ... My wife kept herself for me. There was no man before me." Matt said he can give Mary his undivided heart because he has hers.

"I had a full life," Mary said.

The time others her age spent in "dating around," for example, Mary said, she used to write books, hone a love of music, participate in a worship-and-dance ministry and develop a deeper spiritual life.

"I can see, in Mary, compared to a lot of girls, she is secure in who she is because she has not been knocked around by many and varied relationships," Matt said. "She's very secure, very well-grounded. And that makes her a very good wife."

'Use your wisdom'

"It doesn't make sense to me why people get into this cycle of being lonely, finding only temporary fulfillment with someone, getting hurt because that person uses them, recovering from that, and doing it all over again," said Cara Slothower LaFauci, 21, who married Dan LaFauci, 23, last month.

Cara and Dan said they were both reared in homes that encourage courtship over casual dating. For them, "purposeful relationship" was the only kind they would consider.

"If you don't have a purpose, you don't go anywhere," Cara said. "If you don't have direction, you go around in circles." A Lancaster Mennonite High School graduate, Dan was a business student at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology.

"Yes, there were times when I was lonely," admitted Dan, an administrative assistant for the Lancaster County Convention Center. "I had plenty of those 'another-weekend-by-myself' thoughts. ... But I was also able to see it as a blessing, too, because it was time for me to be more molded as a person, so that I would be ready and prepared for when the relationship did come along." Cara, a graduate of Dayspring Christian Academy, said she didn't entertain thoughts of loneliness. "I just did other things. I became involved in my church and my school, and I had a great time with my girlfriends. ... Student government. Choir. Drama." She also went to a mission school, University of the Nations, at its base in Kona, Hawaii.

Dan and Cara met through a mutual friend at their church, Westminster Presbyterian. One of the first times they "went out" was when Dan helped Cara to move.

That's the way their courtship proceeded, Dan said. He wasn't dressing up and splashing on the cologne, and then taking her to an expensive restaurant to try to impress her. "We saw each other in more natural environments," he said, typically with others around.

Unlike most dating relationships, where a man or woman simply goes in for the kiss, Cara and Dan discussed their rules for kissing at the outset.

He said he and Cara believed that a no-kissing-at-all standard would "lead to feelings building up too much and making purity even more difficult.

"We decided that we could kiss each other, and it would be kept to a regular kiss on the cheek or lips and never anything else, like the neck, for example. ... The other key part to this rule was that we would not kiss each other indoors period, no exceptions. ... We wanted our first indoor kiss to be in the church at the wedding. By the grace of God we stuck to those standards and we have been greatly blessed by it." Those who choose purposeful relationships, Cara and Dan said, typically do so with the support of family and friends, people who will actively help a couple discern between the giddiness of puppy love and the reality of true love.

"It prevents so much heartache down the road," Cara said. "Potentially, it can prevent divorce.

"No one sets out to get divorced. ... But, without being purposeful and intentional, without doing your homework, you can end up somewhere that you didn't want to be." The LaFaucis said they've heard the theory of the "test drive," from people who wonder why couples would marry without first trying one another out sexually.

"If you want to buy a car," Cara responds, "you aren't going to go to the first lot and buy the first car you see. ..." A savvy consumer will search for quality, dependability and structural integrity; and he or she will ask friends and relatives for their opinions on the car.

Similarly, she advised, "Use your wisdom in relationships and it will save you.

"Then using the car analogy your car won't break down two months down the road."

It's a choice

Ryan Bracken, who is marrying Dawn Moore today, admitted that the decision he and Dawn made for sexual purity before marriage, and the purposeful way they directed their relationship is likely to elicit some sneers.

But, Ryan said, "for anybody if they believe in the existence of God, or not, whether they are religious, or not if you live for yourself and desire only to please yourself, you will never, ever be satisfied.

"Do you want your kids to have sex with a million people? To do drugs? To drink? To have five wives?" Ryan asked rhetorically.

The danger of "living selfishly for today," he said, is that it can muck up tomorrow. The deeply fulfilling lives most people claim to want for their own children, he said, needs to be reflected in their own choices.

"If you want to have 'fun,' though, and live for yourself," he said, "then come talk to me in 10 years and tell me how much fun you're having." A purposeful relationship, he added, "isn't a perfect relationship. It's one that strives for excellence. And excellence is obtainable. ...

"But the last thing it is," Ryan said, "is easy."