

Why Rationalism is Key to a Happy Marriage

Jane Austen's [*Pride and Prejudice*](#) famously begins by saying, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

In the hundreds of pages which follow this statement, Austen depicts many marriages, some successful and some decidedly not. The successful ones – such as those between Mr. Bingley and Jane, and Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth – have a common element, namely, friendship and esteem.

The New York Times [recently tackled](#) this subject of friendship in marriage. Noting that many today are quick to claim their spouse as "their best friend," the *NYT* wondered whether such friendship is really possible or even desirable:

"Is considering your spouse your closest friend a sign of hard-earned intimacy, attachment and trust, or is it a sign you've become so enmeshed in the day-to-day logistics of managing your lives that you've given up sexual attraction, passion and erotic play?"

Times columnist Bruce Feiler goes on to cite a study which found that individuals who listed their spouse as their best friend "were twice as likely to have higher life satisfaction." According to an expert on the study, Dr. John Helliwell, spouses do not necessarily need to be best friends in order to have a good marriage, but it does help:

"The benefits of marriage are strong even for those who are littered with outside friends. It's just bigger for those who consider their spouse their closest friend. It's a bonus."

But why is this? There are a number of reasons given by the

experts in the *New York Times*, but I was curious to go beyond these and see what those in the past had to say about the subject. In doing this, I stumbled upon [Reflections on Courtship and Marriage](#), a pamphlet published by Benjamin Franklin in 1746.

According to Franklin, the happy marriage is one which exhibits “mutual Esteem and Friendship for each other in the highest Degree possible.” Franklin goes on to explain that a marriage based primarily on emotional feelings does not have a long shelf-life:

“PASSIONS are extreamly transient and unsteady, and Love, with no other Support, will ever be short liv’d and fleeting. ‘Tis a Fire that is soon extinguished, and where there is no solid Esteem and well cemented Friendship to blow it up it rarely lights again, but from some accidental Impulses, by no Means to be depended on....”

Friendship, however, is based upon something entirely different than emotionalism. It is, as it were, a matter of mind over heart, for friendship is based in rational thought:

*“IT has been already observed, that LOVE considered meerly as a Passion, will naturally have but a short Duration; like all other Passions ‘tis changeable, transient and accidental. **But Friendship and Esteem are derived from Principles of Reason and Thought**, and when once truly fixed in the Mind, are lasting Securities of an Attachment to our Persons and Fortunes; participate with, and refine all our Joys; simpathize with, and blunt the Edge of every adverse Occurrence.”*

This is quite fascinating considering our modern approach to marriage. Today’s young people seem to have the idea that the person they marry must ignite their emotions and cause continual excitement and fulfillment. Unfortunately, that’s

hard to find, a fact which may be [driving the decline](#) in “unpartnered” Americans. For those who do find this type of partner, they’re often in for a rude awakening when those passionate feelings don’t last.

Given Franklin’s advice, would more American young people have happy marriages by looking past the emotionalism involved in finding a “soul-mate,” and instead seek marriage that’s based upon the more rational “meeting of the minds” first?

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