

Advice on choosing and losing a partner.

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PART ONE

This video is about my ideas on choosing a partner, and about how to handle losing a partner.

This is the only youtube video I will make; there won't be a sequel. I'm making it because a friend told me that my thoughts had helped her through a difficult time. If I can help one more person through this video, I'll be happy.

Names have been changed in the stories I use to illustrate my ideas.

Where do my thoughts come from? I have no training in psychology or psychiatry. I married twice and divorced twice. I've been privileged to have had a few remarkable people in my life. I hope I have learned some of their wisdom. I inherited important values from my parents. I have thought carefully about life as I have turned the pages of the years.

I didn't think carefully about choosing a partner when I was young. I responded strongly to visual cues; if she looked good, I was attracted. I think attraction between two people is partly genetically coded, and partly influenced by one's early childhood. In my case my two sisters were tomboys. Jeans, T-shirts, short hair, no makeup, slim, fit and strong. We grew up beside the beach in Hampton, a Melbourne suburb. We spent much of our spare time at the beach with our faithful dog. Back in those days the beach and the bush were wild compared with the carefully manicured landscapes of modern Melbourne. Adventure was on our door-step every day.

I found myself attracted to girls like my sisters. I had a friend called Helen. We liked spending time outdoors. Over time that friendship reached a point where we decided we wanted to make a life together. Marriage was a way of keeping our families happy. We had many adventures over the following years, including time spent travelling in remote parts of Australia.

We never talked about the question "were we suited?". Looking back, I can see it never entered our heads to ask that question. But of course now I am older I can ask the question and answer it.

I have a young friend today who has given some thought to what she wants in a partner. Much more than I did. She asks herself several questions. Does he come from a 'good' family? Is he strong and good-looking? Is he likely to be a good provider? And a good father? Will her parents approve her choice? Is there sickness in his family line?

These qualities are important. But I think that there are five qualities which come ahead of everything else, at least for me.

First: **shared values**: are the same things important to you and your prospective partner? In my case for example, I value the protection of those without voices: the planet's animals and plants, and unborn generations of humans. Helen held the same values.

Second: **shared interests**. I like lonely places: oceans and wild lands. Places where there are no or very few other humans. Helen felt the same way.

Third: **a similar sense of humour**. There are lots of different types: slapstick, rude, stupid, dry... for example. I have a quiet, dry sense of humour. Sometimes I say the opposite of what I actually mean, knowing that my partner will understand. Helen understood. Humour is the lubricant which will get you through many difficult situations. Humour is also a pathway to intimacy... it's very important in a partnership.

Fourth and importantly: **you need to chose a partner with a good heart**. This can be difficult to judge. If a person is setting out to impress you, he or she will do the right thing most of the time. A person's true character will show through when he/she is under stress, perhaps exhausted, or frightened, or sick. Or drunk. If this happens, and you see a glimpse of bad character which you did not expect, my advice is: *do not ignore what you see*. You have just been given a rare window into the person's heart, a window which most of the time is deliberately keep shut. You need to play close attention: proceed at your own risk. Backing out of a relationship early is much easier than backing out late. My advice is: don't take the risk.

Choosing a life partner is probably the most important decision you will ever make. In choosing Helen as a life partner, I did not even attempt to think the issue through. Although I recommend that you **don't** follow my example, I was lucky in my first choice, as it turned out.

Another important clue to the state of a person's heart can be seen in the comments a person makes about an ex-boyfriend or an ex-girlfriend. This is certainly one of the most powerful insights you can get in this regard. Remembering that we are talking about intimate relationships, entered into willingly and freely by both parties, in my view **it is entirely out-of-line to bad-mouth an ex-partner**. This is a person **you** chose as an intimate friend. Looking back on a 'failed' relationship, you must take your share of responsibility. And a sign of a good heart is to take more than your share. A good rule of thumb is "if you can't say something good about someone, don't say anything".

My recommendation is: **if a potential friend or lover bad-mouths an ex-partner, leave this new relationship quickly but quietly**. You must leave. You don't need to give an explanation, and you can't repair what you have discovered. A bad heart cannot be fixed: it's almost certainly there for good. You just need to get out.

So far we have discussed shared interests and values, a sense of humour, and a good heart. The **fifth** essential attribute is **self-confidence**. At first it may not be apparent that you need a partner with strong self-esteem. But believe me, after studying people around me for many years, I know that this is extremely important. Essential, I would say. Self-confidence is largely built in early childhood. Books have been written on how to bring up a child with strong self-confidence. The most important aspects are that the child must see herself (or himself) valued for who she is, not for who her parents want her to be. She must be guided and supported, not controlled. She needs opportunities to explore activities she is interested in, irrespective of her parents' interest in those activities. Most importantly, she needs to be loved and valued, and to know that she is loved.

I have already mentioned that I don't think there is any cure for a bad heart... it's there to stay. I would not make the same comment about lack of confidence, but I will say that, once a person reaches adulthood, lack of self-confidence is extremely difficult to remedy, at least in my experience. In most cases, it will remain with the person, to a greater or lesser extent, and will colour his/her life. There are exceptions, where low self-esteem can be overcome, but these are rare.

So, if you become interested in forming a relationship with someone lacking in self-confidence, my advice is DON'T. Some women (and men) succumb to the idea that they can 'fix' their partner's problem with love. Unfortunately this very rarely works. And if you get deep into a relationship like this, getting out will be difficult and painful for all concerned. Especially for children, if the relationship has been running for a long time.

You can't fix someone else's problem. You can support someone, but they have to fix themselves.

It's most important that you DO NOT enter a relationship with someone lacking in self-confidence, in my view. Back out, quietly and gracefully, as soon as you see warning signs. Even if he is good-looking, amusing or rich. Just back out.

One of the clearest signs is that the potential partner will try to control you. If you are looking for a strong man, look for someone who can guide and support. And listen. A desire to control is a sure sign of weakness, not strength.

Jealousy is part of this desire to control. It can be exaggerated by a fear of loss or loneliness. If you find a potential partner, make sure that he is comfortable with you spending time, without him, with your friends and family. That includes former lovers, if you have them as friends. A strong man will be comfortable knowing that you cherish old friendships, and want to keep them as part of your life.

Another red flag which is likely to indicate trouble ahead is to find a potential partner who habitually talks about grand plans which he intends to do... but never does. Of course we all sometimes make plans which never actually happen, but we don't big-note ourselves about such plans, particularly before they even start. If you must boast about your achievements, DON'T do that *before* you actually succeed!

As it turned out, I was lucky when Helen and I decided to make a life together. She had all five of the most important prerequisites. Matching values and interests. A similar sense of humour. She had strong self-confidence. And most importantly, a good heart. Nevertheless, we split up after 15 years together. Why? Well, it can't be explained simply, but if I was forced to give a simple explanation, I would say that I did not look after her properly: a mistake I was unfortunately to repeat with Elizabeth some years later.

The **sixth** and final point I want to mention is about **leadership**. Any long-term partnership is a team, and a team has to work smoothly together. If you find someone you think might be a good long-term partner, before you make any serious commitment, **talk** with him/her about how you would work together as a team. You may find that your prospective partner wants an arrangement where important decisions are made together, through discussion and consensus. Or one of you may be happy to lead with important decisions: in this case the other partner must be happy with this arrangement, and be prepared to follow. There

will be trouble where both persons in the partnership want to lead on important questions... like having children, where to live, or how to earn money to keep the team going. So... **TALK** about this issue before you make a major commitment.

Those are my thoughts on choosing a partner. Before leaving the subject, I'll make the comment that you should not expect your partner to meet **all** your human needs. It's essential to keep in contact with your family and your friends. And make the most of acquaintances you meet through sports, interest groups and community groups.

I'll now talk about losing a partner.

I'll put it simply. **In my experience, it's all about maintaining love under difficult circumstances.** While this approach **won't work** under some circumstances (which we discuss in the next section) *it will work where-ever a relationship has been based on love from both sides.* If you are a loving person, you will have given your partner love throughout the relationship. And both of you will have reaped the rewards of the intimacy which flows from love. Now that you are splitting up, maintaining the love you have in your heart for your ex-partner is the key to getting through the split-up without unnecessary damage to both parties... and children if there are any.

Your ex-partner is, to a large extent, essentially the same person he/she always was, just a bit older. Now circumstances have changed, and things look different. Maybe she has said she wants to end the relationship. Maybe she's had an affair. Maybe she's already left. Just because you're now on the other side of the fence doesn't mean the qualities which you loved in her have somehow disappeared. They are still there. You need to follow the strength inside your heart. You can continue that love by supporting her, even when she seems to have taken her support away from you. You are not a weakling, who will collapse in self-pity. You can find the strength inside yourself to keep on loving. You must believe in yourself – this is the key to getting through the separation smoothly.

It will sometimes seem that you are placing her interests above your own, even when you feel injured. My experience has been that you can easily withdraw into a shell made up of only your immediate needs. Immersed in self-pity. This seems to be a way of protecting yourself and what you think belongs to you. This may even seem, at the time, as the only obvious path. But what seems to be the case is in fact a passing illusion. If you give in to this illusion, you will lose important futures which, at this time, are entirely obscure to your eyes. Trust me; I will explain by example.

Think of your heart as made of steel. If you hold anger, jealousy, or hate inside your heart for any length of time, it is like holding acid inside that steel heart. **You will be the one to suffer.** No matter how strong your heart is, anger and resentment will eat away at the steel. You will suffer, not your ex-partner. *It is you who will bear the damage.*

I can explain what I mean here through examples.

After we split up, Helen married a mutual friend, Daniel. I had never been particularly close to Daniel. But I soon realised that Helen had made a very good choice. Daniel had confidence in himself and in Helen. He was intelligent, funny and warm. And welcoming. Daniel and I became much better friends than we had

been before Helen and I split-up. We worked on car repair projects together; we went camping together. I would phone him just for a chat. Then he would pass the phone to Helen for me to say hello. If I had let the acid of anger corrode my heart, this important friendship would never have happened. The friendship with Daniel is one of the most important friendships of my life.

The story of one of my friends, Jonah, is almost identical. He had a girlfriend, Cathy. He asked Cathy to move in with him, but she refused, saying that he was too fussy. She had a point. She broke the relationship with Jonah off when she found a new boyfriend, David. Although Jonah was initially rather upset at losing a much loved partner, he and David became firm friends, eventually sailing together (without Cathy) in the South Pacific. If Jonah had let the acid of anger and rejection remain in his heart, he would have lost a future with two of his closest friends.

These futures, as I said earlier, are invisible at the time of a split-up. Holding on to love can open doors which you might never even dream of. And it's not hard to do. Quite the contrary, it's the easiest of the available options, although it may not appear this way at the time.

A third story is about Peter, Susan and Mary. Peter and Susan married, and had two children. When the children were approaching their teenage years, Peter fell in love with Mary, an American woman he met through his job. Peter left Susan and married Mary. However things did not go as well as he had hoped. His children, who stayed with him on alternate weekends, hated Mary, who they saw as responsible for the break-up of their parents. And they were in a position to place Mary under a lot of stress during their visits with their father. Eventually Peter and Mary decided the best course of action was divorce, and Mary returned to America.

The years passed. Peter's ex-wife Susan by this time was happily married with a new partner. The children grew into teenagers and then adults, and started families of their own. Peter did not find another partner; neither did Mary. Peter and Mary remained in contact, and started visiting each other. Peter discussed the situation with his children, who saw how important this relationship was to their father. Both children agreed to support him. Peter asked Mary to marry him (for a second time) and she agreed. When she returned to Australia as his wife, Mary was relieved to find that Peter's two children now had a completely different attitude towards her. After a time, strong friendships developed with both Peter's children and grand-children. Today, Peter and Mary remain happily settled in Australia.

This story could not have unfolded the way it did without the maintenance of love between Peter and Mary, and of course the love between Peter and his children, which underpinned their change of heart.

To summarise my ideas on splitting up with a partner, my strong recommendation is that you remember, and try to maintain, the love you once had for her. If that love was real, and not an illusion, you will be able to treat your ex-partner with respect and generosity, and this will establish a pathway to a future which will probably turn out to be much better than you expect. Although it sounds trite, it really is all about maintaining love in difficult circumstances. Believe in yourself, and you can do it. Later on you will be able to look back, and see the other path you could have chosen: you will be glad you did not follow this path.

PART TWO

At this point I want to bring in another point of view. The experiences I have described have happened within relationships built on love. This is not always the case when two people get together. A person can fall in love with someone who, as time will tell, has character flaws, or mental disorders, which were not apparent at the time the couple decided to build a life together. Under these circumstances, **my dictum of “maintain your love” will NOT see you through to a happy future.**

I have a friend whose lover tried to kill her after she ended the relationship.

When they first met, he appeared to be an interesting person with an enjoyable sense of humour. Underneath that facade he was in fact a killer. If her sister had not arrived, by pure coincidence, at the time of his attack, she would now be dead.

Another friend, similarly, fell head-over-heels in love with an apparently interesting, intelligent and attractive man. They started a life together, and had two sons. Later on, she became uneasy about his anger, jealousy, and aggressive behaviour, especially after he had been drinking. When she told him she wanted a separation, he turned violent. Luckily, today she is alive and happy. And divorced.

Unfortunately, as you can read in the daily news, women are regularly killed by their partners or ex-partners. Women are sometimes the killers, although much less often. Court orders to control aggressive behaviour on the part of an ex-partner are not always effective. You cannot rely solely on the law and the police to protect you.

If you find yourself in this situation, **DO NOT** rest your response on the love you once had for him. You need to get out of the relationship quickly and safely. Don't hesitate to discuss what is happening with family, friends and the police. I recommend that you **DON'T** try to repair a damaged relationship with a person who has displayed aggressive behaviour towards you. These are critical warning signs which, if you ignore them, will place you in grave peril.

If you do have any lingering ideas about repairing the relationship, perhaps thinking that he needs help and you are the one to help him, **forget it.** Just get out, completely. If you have kids, the situation is of course more complicated, but it becomes even more important to get out of the relationship as quickly and safely as you can. If he changes over time, perhaps over years, you may get a chance to think again. Even so, this must be done from a distance, and slowly.

The next question is: how to avoid this situation in the first place?

I suggest that you look for, and pay attention to, warning signs.

Think about human behaviour, and the hidden meanings which lie behind that behaviour.

For example, is he happy for you to express ideas, in company, which are radically different from his? Does he try to correct you, or put your ideas down, in

the company of friends? Does he criticise you privately afterwards? Does he expect you to seem subservient? Does he show any signs of treating you like an ornament? Does he criticise the way you dress, or your weight, or the way you speak?

These are very bad signs. Do not ignore them.

For a partner, look for a man with strong character. A person who will listen to you carefully, and think about what you say. Look for a person who will support you in any of your endeavours, whether or not they hinder or help him. A strong man will look for ways to help you grow, to help you express yourself. A strong man will listen to you and support you. A weak man will try to control you, even put you down. A strong man will share household tasks, many of which may be tedious. A weak man will see these tasks as 'woman's work'.

As an example, let's take the experience of hiking, or bush-walking as it's called in Australia. When walking a narrow trail, the experience of the walker in front is invariably more interesting than the walker behind. Does your partner walk ahead, perhaps unconsciously thinking of himself as 'the leader'? Or does he seek the rear position, giving you the best hiking experience? Where, by the way, he has the best ability to watch over and protect you, should anything unexpected happen. These small matters may, in fact, be of great significance for your life together.

Think very carefully about the meanings behind small behaviours.

Don't worry too much about breaking up a long-term relationship, if it's not working for you. I do not agree with the Christian idea that a marriage is sacred in the eyes of God, and you must do everything you can to hold it together. It might help to think of every major relationship in your life as a reference point, or landmark. Through each relationship, you will learn about yourself, about what you need, and about what you can give to others. If a relationship is not working for you, take the lessons, and move on. If there are children involved, they will be much better off with two separated parents who are happy, rather than with two unhappy parents living together.

PART THREE: SUMMARY

To summarize, I recommend thinking carefully about the suitability of a potential life partner, before making any major commitment to the relationship. It's best to live together, I think, for at least a year before making a major long-term commitment. I recommend finding a partner with similar values, interests and sense of humour. Past that, find someone with a good heart, and strong self-confidence. Finding someone with a good heart is not as easy as you might think, so I give some hints about seeing below the surface of a relationship which seems ok. Do not ignore what you see, it may be an important window, even though it may seem out-of-character at the time. A final issue is that you should talk about leadership within the team which will be your long-term partnership.

Then I talk about how to manage splitting up.

You start a deep relationship believing there is love on both sides.

If that turns out to be correct, my advice is that you should try to maintain that love during the difficult and traumatic process of splitting up, even when you are hurting. Do not let self-pity get the best of you: this would very likely destroy all chances of a happy future for everyone concerned. I use personal stories to illustrate my meaning. Don't let the acid of anger and resentment corrode your heart.

However, unfortunately, in some cases it turns out that there is not love on both sides. Perhaps, contrary to initial appearances, there never was. My advice here is to get out of the relationship as smoothly and quickly as you can. Clearly if there are children involved, or major shared property, these matters need to be handled as sensibly and fairly as possible. But you need to get out. Make up your mind and go.

A transcript of this video is available at onlyoneplanet.com.

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