

Why You
Will Marry the
Wrong Person
&
Other Essays

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&
Other Essays

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I

Why You Will Marry
the Wrong Person

Anyone we might marry could, of course, be a little bit wrong for us. We don't expect bliss every day. We know that perfection is not on the cards. Nevertheless, there are couples who display such deep-seated incompatibility, such heightened rage and disappointment, that we have to conclude that something else is at play beyond the normal scratchiness: they appear to have married the wrong person.

How do such errors happen in our enlightened, knowledge-rich times? We can say straight off that they occur with appalling ease and regularity. Academic achievement and career success seem to provide no vaccines. Otherwise intelligent people daily and blithely make the move.

Given that it is about the single costliest mistake any of us can make (it places rather large burdens on the state, employers and the next generation too), there would seem to be few issues more important than that of marrying intelligently.

It's all the more poignant that the reasons why people make the wrong choices are rather easy to lay out and unsurprising in their structure. We ruin our lives for reasons that can be summed up in an essay. They tend to fall into some of the following basic categories:

A standard
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'And how are
you mad?'

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We don't understand
ourselves

When first looking out for a partner, the requirements we come up with are coloured by a beautifully non-specific sentimental vagueness: we'll say we really want to find someone who is 'kind' or 'fun to be with', 'attractive' or 'up for adventure...'

It isn't that such desires are wrong; they are just not remotely precise enough in their understanding of what we in particular are going to require in order to stand a chance of being happy – or, more accurately, not consistently glum.

All of us are crazy in very particular ways. We're distinctively neurotic, unbalanced and immature, but don't know quite the details because no one ever encourages us too hard to find them out. An urgent, primary task of any lover is therefore to get a handle on the specific ways in which they are mad. They have to get up to speed on their individual neuroses. They have to grasp where these have come from, what they make them do – and, most importantly, what sort of people either provoke

or assuage them. A good partnership is not so much one between two healthy people (there aren't many of these on the planet), it's one between two demented people who have had the skill or luck to find a non-threatening accommodation between their relative insanities.

The feeling that we might not be too difficult to live with should set off alarm bells. The only people we can think of as normal are those we don't know very well. The question is just where the problems will lie: perhaps we have a latent tendency to get furious when someone disagrees with us, or we can only relax when we are working, or we're a bit tricky around intimacy after sex, or we've never been so good at explaining what's on our minds when we're worried. It's these sorts of issues that – over decades – create catastrophes and that we should ideally therefore need to know about way ahead of time, in order to look out for people who are optimally designed to withstand them. A standard question on any early dinner date should be quite simply: 'And how are you mad?'

The problem is that knowledge of our own neuroses is not at all easy to come by. It can take years and situations we have had no experience of. Prior to marriage, we're rarely involved in dynamics that properly hold up a mirror

to our disturbances. Whenever more casual relationships threaten to reveal the 'difficult' side of our natures, we tend to blame the partner – and call it a day. As for our friends, they predictably don't care enough about us to have any motive to probe our real selves. They only want a nice evening out. Therefore, we end up blind to the awkward sides of our natures. On our own, when we're furious, we don't shout, as there's no one there to listen – and therefore we overlook the true, worrying strength of our capacity for fury. Or we work all the time without grasping, because there's no one calling us to come for dinner, how we manically use our jobs to gain a sense of control over life – and how we might cause hell if anyone tried to stop us labouring. At night, all we're aware of is how sweet it would be to cuddle with someone, but we have no opportunity to face up to the intimacy-avoiding side of us that would start to make us cold and strange if ever it felt we were too deeply committed to someone. One of the greatest privileges of being on one's own is the flattering illusion that one is, in truth, really quite an easy person to live with.

With such a poor level of understanding of our characters, no wonder we aren't in any position to know who we should be looking out for.