

Consider these key principles in approaching one of the most important decisions you will ever make.

Choosing Whom to Marry

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When I first began my doctoral work in clinical psychology, I was given a little assignment: read everything that's ever been written about what predicts divorce.

Daunted but determined, I read my way through decades of research. Poring over stacks of articles, I was amazed at how well we could predict these things—multiple studies reported over 90-percent accuracy in predicting who would remain married and who would divorce. The most accurate prediction came from observing how couples resolve conflict, but a great deal of predictive power was available even before couples went on their first date.

I wondered why everyone didn't know this. Choosing whom to marry is such an important, formative decision, and simply knowing a handful of these facts could have an enormous impact. Let me share some key principles that can be helpful to know and consider.

“Birds of a Feather Flock Together” vs. “Opposites Attract”

Do birds of a feather flock together, or do opposites attract? That is, do people have healthier marriages if they are similar to one another or if they have differences that complement and balance out areas of weakness? Answers to questions about people are often complex, but in this case there is a clear answer: the more alike two people are, the more stable and satisfying their marriage. “Birds of a feather” for the win!





Why is that so? Consider this: The marriage relationship includes many important decisions and issues that have to be navigated, and any two people—including very compatible ones—have a lot to work through. If a couple starts out having to blend fundamentally different personalities, interests, and viewpoints, much more effort is required to make the marriage survive. However, if partners begin with similar outlooks and aspirations, their efforts can be directed more toward enriching the relationship and achieving long-term

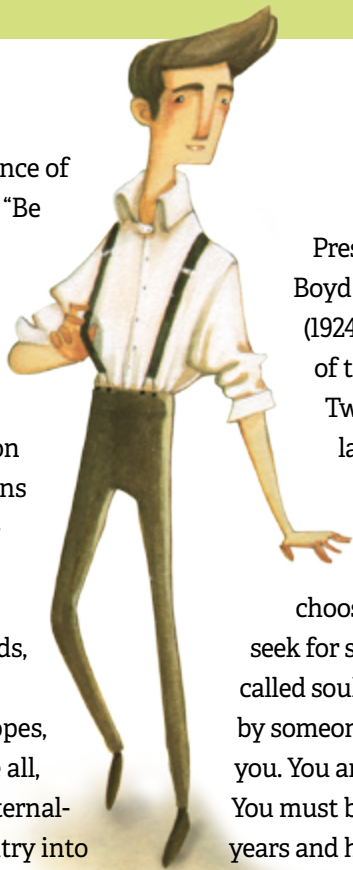
goals rather than trying to reconcile differences. Opposites may sometimes attract, but they have to work much harder at building a happy marriage.

This principle is especially important when it comes to matters of faith. In a large study, researchers examined the principle of “birds of a feather”—researchers call it homogamy—in religious affiliation. As usual in this area of research, they found that sharing your partner’s faith predicted a more stable, secure marriage. A closer look at the data

showed that marriages in which both partners were LDS were among the most stable of any religious pairing in the study. However, when one partner was LDS and the other was not, the rate of divorce increased by 27 percent, placing them among the most at risk of any religious pairing!¹

Why might this be? This finding highlights the power of being “birds of a feather”: those who have deep divisions on core issues have to work much harder to cleave to one another and become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). The Apostle Paul

taught about the importance of homogamy when he said, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6:14). And President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) spoke clearly on this issue: “Many . . . reasons argue eloquently for marriage within the Church, where husband and wife have common backgrounds, common ideals and standards, common beliefs, hopes, and objectives, and, above all, where marriage may be eternalized through righteous entry into the holy temple.”²



Stop Looking for Your Soul Mate

You might be thinking, “Isn’t our job simply to follow the Spirit to the person chosen for us in premortality?”

Although this may be a popular cultural sentiment, it does not square with the clear, consistent counsel from living prophets.

President Kimball taught: “‘Soul mates’ are fiction and an illusion; and while every young man and young woman will seek with all diligence and prayerfulness to find a mate with whom life can be most compatible and beautiful, yet it is certain that almost any good man and any good woman can have happiness and a successful marriage if both are willing to pay the price.”³

President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, similarly taught: “I do not believe in predestined love. . . . You must do the choosing, rather than to seek for some one-and-only so-called soul mate, chosen for you by someone else and waiting for you. You are to do the choosing. You must be wise beyond your years and humbly prayerful unless you choose amiss.”⁴

Agency is so critical to our Heavenly Father’s plan; He does not remove it when it comes to choosing a spouse.

This may seem unromantic to some, but I would argue that it is far more romantic that you choose your spouse. It is much more meaningful to say to the one you love, “No, you weren’t chosen by someone else; I chose you. And I will continue to choose you every day of our life for eternity.”

In contrast, the idea of soul mates fosters a shallow definition of love as an intense feeling that really amounts to infatuation. If you buy into this fallacy, you may mistakenly decide something is wrong when the chemical rush of infatuation begins to evolve into the deeper but

less-frenetic love characteristic of enduring marriages.

Years ago I worked with a couple who were not LDS but were deeply religious. The husband had not been faithful to his wife. When I spoke with him alone, he explained, “This new woman I have met is my soul mate; I made a mistake the first time around. I am convinced that God is giving me a second chance to make things right so I can be with my soul mate.” His belief that he had a soul mate did not strengthen his commitment to his wife. Instead, it offered a quick, easy way to get back to the rush of infatuation that he had defined as “real love.”

The notion of soul mates can undermine the development of healthy, enduring relationships. Quoting an embroidered statement fashioned by his aunt, President Thomas S. Monson (1927–2018) taught, “Choose your love; love your choice.”⁵

Making a Wise, Inspired Choice

So how do we go about making a wise, inspired choice of a spouse? Instead of looking for a soul mate, I suggest two things: (1) enjoy the process of dating and (2) develop the attributes you wish to see in your future spouse.

Dating is meant to be fun! Perhaps because we recognize how central

marriage is to God's plan, we develop a results-focused mentality that makes dating seem less like fun and more like digging a ditch. Usually this is because we can only see value in the outcome (marriage) and not the process (dating). If we adopt this mentality, dating can feel like a dreaded part-time job in which we interview a series of job applicants, most of whom we quickly decide to reject because of their manifest lack of potential. Ironically, this mentality makes it difficult not only to have fun but also to date in a way that leads to healthy relationships. If, on a first date, your mind is overloaded with thoughts about what color hair your children will have, you may have adopted this mindset!

By dating a number of different people without making each interaction a tribunal on the individual's fitness for eternal companionship, some good things will happen. You will become wiser about what you have to offer your future spouse, where you need some work, and what you hope for in a spouse. Some seemingly promising relationships will progress and end. That will be painful, but breaking up is a healthy part of this process rather than evidence you are doing something wrong. A natural consequence of investing in this process

will be wisdom, personal growth, and quite often, finding someone whom you will want to choose as your eternal companion.

Doctrine and Covenants 88:40 teaches that "virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light." Applied to marriage and relationships, this truth means that if you have developed light, virtue, intellect, and thoughtfulness, you will naturally be attracted to those who have similar traits.

Often young adults have a list of attributes they are looking for in a spouse ("taller than me," "gourmet chef," "future General Authority"). Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles commented on these types of lists, noting that it is presumptuous of us to think that we are entitled to the partners we describe in our lists. Instead, he suggested, we should develop within ourselves the important attributes we desire in a spouse.⁶

By humbly cultivating important virtues, dating for fun without undue focus on "results," and staying close to the Spirit, you will develop as a person and

naturally gravitate to one of those "birds of a feather" whom you will love with your whole soul. ■

NOTES

1. See Evelyn L. Lehrer and Carmel U. Chiswick, "Religion as a Determinant of Marital Stability," *Demography*, vol. 30, no. 3 (Aug. 1993), 385–404.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, "Marriage and Divorce" (Brigham Young University devotional, Sept. 7, 1976), 2, speeches.byu.edu.
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 194.
4. Boyd K. Packer, *Eternal Love* (1973), 11.
5. Thomas S. Monson, "Hallmarks of a Happy Home," *Ensign*, Nov. 1988, 71.
6. David A. Bednar, in "Interview with Elder and Sister Bednar," *Conversations* (audio program, episode 1), mormonchannel.org.

