

*Note: I wrote this several years ago in response to an op-ed in the New York Times. It remains a good summary of my ideas about love and marriage; and it can be read without having read the article that prompted it.*

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Why You CAN Marry the Right Person

By Sam R. Hamburg

In his authoritatively titled op-ed, “Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person,” the novelist, Alain de Botton, whips a mélange of personal impressions, empirically unfounded but presented as facts, and assorted well-worn items of psychobabble to serve up a conclusion that is false. I am a scientifically-minded psychologist who has been struggling to help couples with their marriages since the time de Botton was struggling with his addition and subtraction. For me, love, marriage, and compatibility have been not a sideline but a central concern. I am impelled to set the facts straight.

de Botton’s argument runs approximately as follows: You are doomed to marry the wrong person because: (1) we are all emotionally flawed, and (2) have little insight into our own flaws or those of the people we fall in love with;(3) we are desperately lonely;(4) “the more imprudent a marriage appears...the safer it can feel”;(5) our childhood experiences cause us to confuse love with “more destructive dynamics” so that as adults we “find ourselves rejecting certain candidates for marriage not because they are wrong but because they are too right”;(6) “we don’t associate being loved with feeling happy”; and (7) the perfect mate “who shares our every taste...and who can meet all our needs and satisfy our every yearning” does not exist.

Let’s agree, in humility, that proposition 1 is true. As for propositions 2 and 3, de Botton may know they apply to him, but he has no way of knowing if they apply to the rest of us. And while there is some evidence that high neuroticism makes for poorer marriage partners, there’s not enough of it to go around to account for all the unhappy marriages: most of us are reasonably mentally healthy and well-functioning. Propositions 4, 5, and 6 are pop-psych clichés with origins in theories that go back almost a hundred years. In all that time, no credible empirical evidence has been put forward to support them. Proposition 7 is a straw-man argument that conflates compatibility with perfect congruence. A partner need not be our clone to be suitable for us. For example, my wife is not much interested in music, but music is of the greatest importance to me. That seemingly large difference has not stopped us from being happy with each other over many years.

So much for de Botton’s argument. His concluding assertion is this: “Compatibility is an achievement of love; it must not be its precondition.” This is the exact opposite of the truth. It is contradicted by a substantial body of social science

research demonstrating that compatibility is an abiding, stable, and measurable attribute that couples possess, in greater or lesser degree, before marriage; and that premarital compatibility predicts marital longevity and happiness. For example, PREPARE, is a short, simple, paper-and-pencil test of compatibility, developed by David H. Olson and colleagues at the University of Minnesota. Premarital couples who score high on PREPARE have longer, happier marriages than couples who score low on it.

So, contrary to de Botton, compatibility exists prior to, and is a prerequisite for, happy marriage. Most of us have some sense of the central importance of compatibility—the internet dating sites tout their ability to spot it for us. But why, exactly, is it crucial to lasting love?

You will notice that de Botton, like other writers who seek to mystify love, makes no attempt to account for what it is and how it comes about. Here is my own, compatibility-based, account: All adult love (that is, love having a sexual component) is the emotional result of an overt, observable process--mutual approval (or to use a fancier term, affirmation). In the early, romantic phase what is being affirmed first and foremost is each other's physical-sexual self. That physical-sexual affirmation is so important to us and so powerful that it makes affirming many other aspects of each other virtually automatic. We want to believe that we are well suited, overall, to someone we are so powerfully attracted to. I think of romantic love as a mutual affirmation steamroller, powered by the superabundant energy of a new sexual relationship. Once that energy runs down a bit, as it always does sooner or later, every couple, whether they know it or not is faced with the question, 'what, really, do we have to affirm about each other?' And this is where compatibility (which I will define simply as similarity) comes in. *You can affirm an aspect of somebody else only if you can empathically understand it—and you can understand it only if you two are similar in that aspect.* An example unrelated to love will make this clear: You're discussing some important issue, say gun control, with someone whose opinion is opposed to yours. You understand what the other person is saying--you don't have a communication problem--what you don't understand is how that other person could possibly think and feel the way they do. And, of course, you can't affirm them in that aspect. Indeed, you may disapprove of them or dislike them on account of it.

People who were wise or just lucky (as I happened to be) in their mate choice married somebody similar to themselves in many aspects. Such couples can continue to give each other plenty of affirmation beyond the romantic phase, and their love lasts. Couples who are incompatible--different from each other in many aspects--bump up against that failure of understanding everywhere they turn. They can't communicate their way around it. Once the romantic phase ends, they run out of fuel for mutual affirmation, their love drains away, and they wonder why.

A high level of mutual understanding is the defining feature of lasting love but also of best friendship. If lasting love is essentially best friendship plus sex, we can immediately see why it is hard, though not impossible, to marry the right person: *None of us can be best friends with just anybody.* Because of our multifaceted, individual uniqueness it is hard for any of us to find many people with whom we coincide enough

for a high level of mutual understanding. On the other hand, people we can be sexually attracted to are relatively plentiful. It is easy to believe that, having found somebody of good character who is physically attractive and who meets our demographic requirements for a mate (right age, educational level, occupational attainment, etc.), we have hit the jackpot.

The strong social pressure to get married makes it even easier to believe this. Marriages are no longer arranged but marriage remains a central social institution, performing many of the social functions it did back when marriages were arranged: organizing kinship and property relations, defining responsibility for and rights to children, controlling sexuality. Love is private, but marriage is public. Society at large, and our families in particular, have an intense interest in our getting married. We experience the social, public nature of marriage as the pressure to get married. Everybody else seems to be doing it--we should, too. The erroneous idea that marriage is hard work is part of that pressure, encouraging people to override their doubts and hesitations about marrying a partner who doesn't feel quite right. (Hard work contributes as little to happy marriage as it does to best friendship.)

In short, the relatively easy availability of sexually attractive but not necessarily compatible partners, and the social pressure to get married conspire to lead people to marry the wrong person. It happens frequently, as we all know, but that does not mean we are fated to it.

de Botton's "good news" is oddly in keeping with the retrograde advice of conservative, religiously oriented boosters of marriage (people with whom, I suspect, he would not want to be associated): adopt a "philosophy of pessimism," understand that we cannot avoid suffering, cultivate a sense of humor and toleration--in brief, suck it up and become a better person.

My good news is different: There is plenty of accurate information out there on the true nature of compatibility. People can avail themselves of it and equip themselves to make a clear-eyed assessment of their compatibility with a romantic partner. They can arrive at a realistic set of expectations about what they can and cannot expect from that partner. And with patience and persistence they can find someone who is both their passionate lover and their best friend.

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