

Commitment

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John and Julie Gottman are co-founders of the Gottman Institute and have been conducting research on relationships for 40 years. Dr. John Gottman was named one of the Top 10 Most Influential Therapists of the past quarter century by the Psychotherapy Networker, has earned numerous awards, authored or co-authored over 200 published academic articles and more than 40 books. This dynamic team knows their stuff about relationships – both the “masters” and the “disasters,” as they call them – and what they have to teach us is grounded soundly in evidence from research conducted in what they affectionately call “The Love Lab” based out of the University of Washington in Seattle. From the Gottman Institute website, I found this description of commitment:

Commitment

“This means believing (and acting on the belief) that your relationship with this person is completely your lifelong journey, for better or for worse (meaning that if it gets worse you will both work to improve it). It implies cherishing your partner’s positive qualities and nurturing gratitude by comparing the partner favorably with real or imagined others, rather than trashing the partner by magnifying negative qualities, and nurturing resentment by comparing unfavorably with real or imagined others.”

Gottman research tells us that 69% of a couple’s problems are perpetual. So when you pick your person, you pick your problems. The Gottman Method speaks realistically of “the good enough” relationship and teaches couples how to build one based on their Sound Relationship House model. This model fleshes out essentially 3 relationship domains: Friendship, Conflict Management, and Shared Meaning. Therapy teaches couples skills for all three domains. They also teach us that there is a “magic ratio” of 5 to 1. This means that for every negative interaction during conflict, a stable and happy marriage has five (or more) positive interactions.

Now, I am not here to run a seminar on The Gottman Method...so herein marks the end of the lesson. What I would like to suggest, though, is that we can draw on this model for guidance in having and maintaining a healthy relationship with our church. Let me read again the Gottman statement on commitment, but this time think of the statement in regards to your relationship with this church body. “This means believing (and acting on the belief) that your relationship with this (church) is completely your lifelong journey, for better or for worse (meaning that if it gets worse you will both work to improve it). It implies cherishing your (church’s) positive qualities and nurturing gratitude by comparing the (church) favorably with real or imagined others, rather than trashing the (church) by

magnifying negative qualities, and nurturing resentment by comparing unfavorably with real or imagined others.”

As a psychotherapist in private practice, I often explore with people their choices in commitments – whom to choose, whether or not to stay with the person they chose long ago, whether or not to take it to the next level with a person they recently met, whether or not a betrayal spells the end or if recovery is possible. I also work with many folks who are single and, based on Gottman research, we explore what to look for when having those first few dates.

I once stumbled upon this fun little article called *How To Pick Your Life Partner* on a website called *Wait But Why*. It’s humorous, even a bit snarky, but seems to deliver some truths about relationships – both mistakes people make and what, instead, people should be prioritizing to find a healthy pairing. It uses caricatures to illustrate common mistakes and I think we, congregants, may make similar errors.

The first type is titled *Overly Romantic Ronald*, whose downfall is believing that love is enough of a reason to marry someone. You know the kind. The one who says things like “Everything happens for a reason. I’m totally in love and that’s all that matters.” Once they’ve found their soul mate, they stop questioning things. Love certainly is a crucial piece but without being accompanied by other important things, it’s certainly not enough.

Next, they describe *Fear Driven Frida*, who runs around screaming “Somebody marry me!” This is the type who fears being the last single friend, being an older parent or missing the childrearing boat entirely, fears being judged. And fear leads us to settle for the not-so-great partnership just to have someone. Never mind the fear of spending two-thirds of your life in misery because you’ve chosen the wrong person.

Then there’s *Externally Influenced Ed* who lets other people lead him through his selection process, or perhaps even more sad, motivating him to break up with someone because of external disapproval or a factor that the chooser doesn’t truly care about but feels they must stick to because of family insistence. Or the opposite – that everyone else is thrilled with the pairing, which looks so great from the outside while Ed feels it’s not so great on the inside.

There’s also *Shallow Sharon* who is more concerned with a person’s data points than the personality underneath. Appearances, resume items, wealth weighing more heavily than the quality of connection one feels. The author coined the term “scan-tron boyfriend” because they correctly fill out all the bubbles.

And finally, there's Selfish Stanley broken down into three variations. First, the my-way-or-the-highway type who values his own needs, desires, opinions over his partner's. This is the kind of person who wants to keep his single life but have someone along for the ride. The second variation is The Main Character, who is so self-absorbed that she seeks a partner more as a kind of therapist or admirer while not ever returning the favor. 90% of discussions center around this person's day. And the last variation of Selfish Stanley is The Needs Driven type who selects someone based on how well their needs are met – one who cooks for them, provides, will be a great parent to their kids, keeps the house organized. Great perks for sure, but not enough to have a sense of long lasting contentment with another human being.

Can you see it? The parallels to mistakes we might make as congregants? Overly Romantic Ronald who is just over the moon to have discovered the UU church, who puts this community on a pedestal, and holds on to an idealized version of church. Fear-Driven Frida who joins because she's afraid no other group will accept her. Externally Influenced Ed who slinks around the periphery without joining because other people will think he's gone to the dark side or turned his back on his family's religion. Shallow Sharon who attends on Sunday to say she's been here, who chooses this church because educated liberals she knows belong here. And Selfish Stanley who wants church to be done his way, who dominates discussions and basks in attention received, or who joins because he needs childcare relief on weekends, or needs an outlet for his musical talents.

All of these types end up unhappy in relationships with partners or with a church community because they are missing the boat, the bigger picture. They are consumed by a force that doesn't take into account the reality of what makes partnership and membership a healthy, happy sustainable thing.

So, you ask...what does make a partnership healthy and long lasting? From afar, a marriage is a poetic love story, viewed from the outside the way we experience a romance movie or novel. But on the inside, we don't experience sweeping strokes because we live in the daily grind, the nooks and crannies of life. The devil is indeed in the details, my friends. It's the little things that determine our happiness. Did you know that the first three minutes of a conversation determine its outcome? Much depends on a gentle vs harsh start up. Marriage isn't the amazing trip you took to the Baja Peninsula, closing on a terrific new house, or how you observe Valentine's Day. Marriage is forgettable Wednesday, folks. It's the 15, 473rd typical dinner in the house you've owned for years that is in desperate need of some fresh paint.

And so is church. Church is not an amazing Sunday sermon, a killer social justice rally, or the candle-lit singing of Silent Night on Xmas Eve. Church is the umpteenth stewardship

potluck, cleaning up the gardens every fall, the forgettable sermon followed by music that left you with a pleasant feeling, watching a member's baby grow year by year and hoping we played a small part in her development somewhere along the way.

The How to Pick Your Life Partner article breaks down what to look for in a mate into three key elements: 1) An Epic Friendship, 2) A Feeling of Home, and 3) A Determination to be Good at Marriage. Epic Friendship requires a great sense of humor, the ability to have fun even in uncomfortable circumstances, respect for each other's ways of thinking, and a decent amount of common interests or glue. A Feeling of Home requires trust and security, natural chemistry, being on the same "wave length" together, and an acceptance of human flaws. Flaws are 100% part of the package and room for them must be made. Remember the Gottman research that shows 69% of a couple's problems are perpetual. And a Feeling of Home requires an overall positive vibe ~ the ol' Gottman ratio of 5 positives for every negative. Lastly, Determination to be Good at Marriage involves recognition that relationships are hard and require serious skills in communication, maintaining equality, and fighting well. The Gottmans' coined The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ~ Criticism, Defensiveness, Stonewalling, and Contempt as hallmarks of unhealthy conflict. It is human to commit these sins from time to time, but it is in our best interests to learn the antidotes to each in order to achieve the purpose of conflict ~ deepening understanding.

Continuing our analogy to relationship with church ~ Does this place offer the stuff of epic friendship? Do we share a sense of humor, find ways to have fun, respect each other's ways of thinking, and have a handful of similar interests? What strikes me as particularly important here is that if we want to build commitment within our membership, we need to have fun. The author of the article suggests thinking of The Traffic Test – imagine getting stuck in traffic with a person. Would you be delighted to have a lengthier visit than you were expecting or would you be wishing the traffic would get a move on? If we want committed members, we need to be a place that people want to linger in and we need to ask ourselves what we are doing to contribute to that atmosphere. A Feeling of Home means transparency in our operations, promoting an inclusive wavelength that appeals to enough people to fill our houses of worship, and most importantly, accepting flaws. This church body is made of human beings. Flaws are part of church. Imagine a practice of feeling a gripe rising within you on any given Sunday, something that annoys or irritates, and deciding to accept it as a flaw that comes with a pretty nice package. The Gottmans provide great tools for this exercise – the assumption of similarity: assume things you do also annoy and irritate other people in this church. Let's make room for each other and give the gift of acceptance so that we may also receive it. And practice maintaining a positive perspective – choosing to believe that, if hurt happens, it was not necessarily intentional but instead means something is not yet fully understood. Hence, the Gottmans' suggestion that the purpose of conflict is to deepen understanding. If we seek to avoid the 4

Horseman, we can dialogue about our problems, maintain equality, and work toward compromise. And this requires serious determination to be good at relationship.

Commitment is not glamorous, easy, or always fun. Being realistic about this is a gift. David Whyte writes about despair as the emotion that shows up when there is a gap between ideal notions we hold versus the reality of a situation. Despair helps us move toward acceptance of reality. So if you ever feel it, think of it as a gift ushering you toward a fuller understanding of what already is. If we hold realistic expectations of committed relationships, do our part to participate in the health of them, then we can enjoy all the gifts that come with what the Gottmans lovingly refer to as “the good enough relationship.” May it be so.