

Is Love a Win-Win?

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My apologies for printing such an explicit image in the order of service today, but I want to be sure you see, and understand, the dangers of sex.

This is a picture of meiosis, a necessary stage in sexual reproduction. It's dangerous and I would say "do not try this at home," but given the ways of all flesh there is no denying that this risky behavior will occur within us all. Even the purest of the pure.



Meiosis: the creation of gametes—sperm and eggs. Gametes are unusual cells, with only half as many chromosomes as the other cells in our bodies. The math is simple. Each of us received chromosomes from our mother and father. If our kids were to inherit them all (chromosomes from all four of their grandparents) and then their kids did the same, and their kids did the same, we would be accumulating an awful lot of chromosomes. So (oversimplifying a bit) we cut ourselves in half before we pass ourselves on to the next generation. That is, the chromosomes that each of us got from our mother, and those we got from our father, we have these, fully, in every one of our cells *except* our gametes. Gametes are haploid: cells with only half the usual number of chromosomes. To get to this haploid state they go through the dangerous process of meiosis, recombining and dividing up our mother and father's DNA in a zillion combinations.

In order for meiosis to occur, huge (tiny) strands of DNA have to align just right in order to split into a viable gamete. If it's not a good match, the new cells will either self-destruct, or pass on a genetic error.

And even when gamete formation does work, most, of course, never meet their other half. They just go on, haploid ever after. The odds of any single lucky sperm fusing with a good egg to form a chromosomal combination that never before existed—the odds of you or me coming into existence—are infinitesimally small.

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The alchemy of Love is as complex as the biology of Love. But either you believe in Love's alchemy intuitively and there is nothing to explain, or you understand alchemy to be a delusion, which also needs no explanation.

And Love of course is not just reproductive biology or romantic alchemy. We must also consider the economy of Love and its calculus.

Love has its plusses and minuses; potential and risk. Whether we're talking about passion or friendship... the love between parent and child... commitment to a cause... or altruistic generosity... in all of these forms, love has its costs and benefits.

So we might ask: is Love worth it? Do we need it? Do we want it? How much will we give? And how much more can we take?

Let's look at two kinds of equations—those played out in zero-sum games and non-zero-sum games.

A zero-sum game is like sharing a bar of chocolate. You might share the chocolate with one valentine or one hundred; in any case, no matter how you divide it up, there is only so much chocolate. For one person to get more someone else has to get less.

A slightly more sophisticated definition of a zero-sum game is that for every possible outcome, when you add the net gains of the winners and the net losses of the losers, you get zero. The sum of losses and gains is equal, so for anyone to do better someone has to do worse.

A *non-zero-sum* game is one in which the collective gains and losses do not add to zero. Rather, the accumulated benefits can outweigh the accumulated losses. Everyone can win, a little, or a lot. You might ask: do such games exist? And can Love be like that?

A non-zero-sum game may involve synergy. That's when the outcome, the result of everyone's contribution, can be bigger better richer *more* than what we'd get by adding together what everyone has individually contributed. It's also synergy when a group (or a congregation), working together, accomplishes more than all of the individuals would have accomplished separately.

It's lovely to think that this is possible. And I would guess we've all experienced synergy at home or on the job, in decision-making, planning, or working with others. But there are certainly no guarantees that when two or three are gathered synergy will be there. It often takes more time and more attention to achieve synergy than it takes to simply throw all of our resources together, average them out, and divide them up again.

Averaging is a simple, zero-sum function. Throw everything together into a single blob, and divide it up. In synergy, on the other hand, the parts remain parts: connected, interdependent, and related perhaps in unexpected ways.

Does Love have that kind of potential?

Maybe. But first let's complete the math. Happily, in a non-zero-sum game we *can* get an unexpectedly positive outcome, maybe even a gain for everyone. But "non-zero" can also mean less than zero, a loss for everyone, or a loss for some that's greater than the combined benefit to others.

I imagine we've all experienced this in love: inexplicable loss even when it seems like everyone is trying to make it work.

Sometimes it's a bad fit, or we're too much alike, or we're too close. Sincere efforts to love can fail for couples or families or voluntary associations of people passionately committed to a mission. Sincere efforts to love can fail when we overestimate our abilities, succumb to group-think, or try to be something we're not.

Love left alone is another non-zero-sum game. Love left alone can simply fade away. It's the natural law of entropy.

So there are no guarantees in love, but “win-win or no deal” is something we can shoot for.

“Win-win or no deal” is an idea popularized by Steven Covey in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. We’ve already looked at several possible outcomes of human interaction: situations where *we* win while others lose, we lose while others win... as well as win-win and lose-lose outcomes. Another possibility is that we focus not on coercing the other side lose...but simply not caring what happens to anyone else... just as long as we, personally, win.

“Win-win or no deal” is the flip side to not caring. “Win-win or no deal” means deciding to engage in a relationship if and only if everyone can win. “Win-win or no deal” is not self-sacrificing; it can’t be just making someone else happy at our own expense. But we commit to letting go of relationships if, even with genuine effort, we cannot foresee a positive outcome for all parties.

Is that a reasonable strategy for Love? The history of marriage may provide some insight.

In different times and places marriage has had a variety of purposes: to gain access to hunting grounds...to create trade alliances, to consolidate wealth between extended families...to produce laboring children and provide for security through one’s own disability or old age...to create a household with a synergistic divisions of labor between partners...to maintain social respectability...or to establish clear lines of legal inheritance. All very pragmatic purposes.

As for love, attraction, intimacy, sexual fidelity, no doubt these motivations have also existed within married relationships, but through most of human history they were not primary. Political, social, and economic security and advancement have long been the prominent functions of marriage. And the forms created to perform these marital functions have been incredibly diverse.

So while some cry out that society should get back to the “traditional” norms of marriage, if we were to do so we would have to include well-established traditions of polygamy and polygyny, the marriage of adults to children, marriages in which men could demand sex at any time and could beat their wives with impunity.

We would have to consider the tradition among the aristocracy of twelfth and thirteenth century Europe, where marriage was socially acceptable, but true love was conceivable only within adulterous affairs. We would need to affirm those cultures from Ghana to Indonesia where “men traditionally live with their mothers and sisters even after they are married.”

And we would have to acknowledge that in some West African societies a woman could be married to another woman as a ‘female husband.’ It being understood that any children they would bring to the marriage—or bear through sex with a third party—would be legal descendants of both of the women.

Traditional Chinese and Sudanese societies have recognized spirit marriages, in which one of the partners is dead before the marriage occurs. It’s a way to form ties between families, or maintain the social norms of marriage, without the trouble of actually having to live with someone. In Toda society in southern India, a girl married at a young age becomes the wife not only of her husband, but of all of his brothers.

Confucius defined wife as one who submits to another. Modern day Southern Baptists have made this their official policy, and ancient Romans shared the same notion which is why, though they allowed two men to marry one another, they thought it was bizarre for a man to submit to another man.

Today in France and Canada, an individual can establish a legally recognized caregiving, or resource-pooling relationship with any other person and receive many legal and financial benefits that used to be reserved for married couples. Siblings can take advantage of this arrangement, as can children with an aging parent, or a celibate priest with his housekeeper.

These examples are from a book called *Marriage, A History*, by Stephanie Coontz, a professor at Evergreen State. They might cause you wonder—with so many social expectations about love and relationships unsettled, and in flux—can love be a win-win?

Now that artificial differences between men and women, differences that were once enforced by law and custom are breaking down... now with the rise of urbanization, and it being much harder for societies to punish those who don't conform to social expectations about how to love... now that birth control is widely available, and single people and unmarried couples commonly choose to have children... now that women are neither legally nor economically dependent upon men, and men have microwave ovens if they don't want to cook... now what?

Stephanie Coontz concludes both optimistically and realistically: “Marriage has become more joyful, more loving, and more satisfying for many couples than ever before in history. At the same time it has become more optional and more brittle. These two streaks cannot be disentangled.” More joyful and satisfying and optional and brittle...and these cannot be disentangled.

So within this context, is love a win-win? I think it can be. But the price we pay is that Love can also be no deal. More than ever before we have choices about both if and how we will be in relationship with one another.

Rather than social convention and legal requirement, today we have something better, more civil, more honest. Instead of love, honor and obey, we have the opportunity to love, honor and negotiate.

Negotiation, of course, is a two way street in the land of Love. Negotiation is disruptive, it takes time, and its outcomes are always uncertain. In the 1950s, family stability was valued so highly that advice manuals for young married couples suggested that a wife should pretend to be interested in her husband's work, and he should pretend to be interested in her day. Adjusting from expectations like these to the still-to-be-negotiated expectations of tomorrow will be disruptive and sometimes painful. At times it may feel like splitting ourselves in half and rearranging all of our little parts.

We find ourselves today in the midst of a comparatively slow but very real revolution of love. A revolution that provides opportunity without providing great clarity about our future.

But one thing we can be clear about is this: we would do well to join our fate only to those loving relationships that are open to negotiation. In relationships with our biological families and with our valentines of choice, in relationship to our congregation as a whole, or to the whole human race... we've got to seek, and negotiate toward, win-win synergy. Or no deal.