

CONSCIOUS DATING

Finding
The Love
Of Your
Life In
Today's
World



David Steele

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All personal vignettes, anecdotes, and stories are from my life, the lives of my clients, or people I interviewed. However, names and identifying details have been altered to preserve their privacy.

Conscious Dating: *Finding the Love of Your Life in Today's World*

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Introduction

IN TODAY'S SOCIETY, we all want the same thing, whether we are single or married, young or old, gay or straight: to love and to be loved. The great majority of us desire a fulfilling life partnership. As social beings, we need intimacy and connection with a community of friends and family, and a committed relationship that meets our emotional, physical, and spiritual needs. As our world grows increasingly complex, personal relationships—the building blocks of our society—seem to suffer. We want to be happy and fulfilled in our most important relationships, but don't seem to know how.

The rules for dating and mating have changed, and up until now you may have been discovering the new rules by trial and error. The good news is that in today's world you are able to live the life that you choose. I hope this book helps you make conscious, wise, and effective relationship choices. Moreover, I sincerely hope you will “find the love of your life and the life that you love.”

Regrettably, one holdover from the past is a misperception that singles are selfish, failures, inadequate, immature, unwanted, and/or unlovable. When that misperception merges with our impatience and desire for immediate gratification—an unfortunate characteristic of today's culture—many singles believe that the path to happiness lies in getting into a relationship as quickly as possible. Typically, after heartbreak and failure, many singles feel confused about how to make relationships work. Thus, you may hesitate to trust yourself and others. Consciously or unconsciously, you may fear commitment. Unsatisfying and painful relationship experiences breed discouragement and defensiveness. This intensifies a fear of intimacy and creates barriers to having the relationship you really want.

You are not alone. Today, there are more single people than ever before: 101 million singles in the United States, which means 46 percent of the adult population. Since 85 percent of adults marry, it

is clear that the great majority of people prefer to be in a committed relationship.¹

Most singles today want to find their life partner, but are scared and confused, afraid of failure and perplexed about how to succeed. There is a whole growth industry providing solutions for singles, much of which is shallow, exploitive, and worthless. Our high divorce rate suggests that this process is ineffective. As a result, people are increasingly aware of the importance of making good relationship choices, of realizing that infatuation, hope, promises, and good intentions will not help them find and keep the love of their life. Singles like you seem ready and eager to learn how to have conscious, intentional, and successful committed relationships.

In *Conscious Dating*, I hope to help you find your Life Partner efficiently and effectively. However, the quickest route to happiness is not necessarily the best route. I will give you a road map to avoid mirages, dead ends, potholes, and swamps so that you are able to go where you genuinely want and need to be.

Finding the love of your life in today's world means being the pioneer of your destiny. When it comes to relationship choices, there are no guarantees or predictable outcomes, despite romantic promises and fantasies. *Conscious Dating* can help you have the life and relationship that you want by showing you how to make intentional, conscious choices. In these chapters you will learn more about who you really are and how to get what you want in your life. You have many choices. You are not bound by the traditions of the past. You are free to choose the life and relationships that you *really* want.

MY STORY

Like you, I've learned about life and relationships from personal experience—first, the wrong lessons and eventually, the right ones. Growing up in a single-parent family, there was no one to show me how to get what I wanted and needed in my life and relationships. I had to learn by trial and error.

One of my first serious relationships led to marriage. My wife and I had married young and unconsciously. There was a lot of tension in our relationship, but I believed that love could conquer all, and if we just worked hard enough we could “make” the relationship work. Not so. It was a hard and devastating lesson, learning the reality of relationships. In 1990, after ten years of marriage, the birth of our daughter, and years of unsuccessful marriage counseling, we divorced. It was the same year I started my private practice as a marriage and family therapist. How ironic.

In 1997, I had been a helping professional for almost two decades, including seven years of full-time private practice. When I decided to become a therapist, I fantasized about being a superhero that, on his own, could lower our country’s divorce rate. But through all those years, my work did not seem to be making couples happier or more stable. And, at age forty, my personal life was not looking very positive either.

I’d been running a yellow pages ad offering professional help for “couples in crisis.” Couples were continually coming to me seeking support. But rather than saving their marriages, half or more of my clients were still ending up in divorce court. I was burning out.

Today, I look back and wonder, half-jokingly, why I didn’t advertise to help “happy couples” or “easy couples.” Instead, I was seeing angry and bitter couples on the verge of breaking up. Often, I was the second call they made after first consulting a divorce lawyer. For a long time I felt responsible for saving their marriages, and if I couldn’t, it was just a matter of my needing more training and experience. Over time, I discovered that the average success rate for other marriage and family therapists was no better than mine. I was somewhat comforted by these statistics, but dissatisfied at the same time.

I was in no hurry to remarry. A few years after my divorce, I had started dating a woman who had worked with me at a local counseling clinic. She was fun and attractive and pursued me persistently. We decided to live together. It turned out to be a passionate

push-and-pull relationship with lots of chaos and broken promises. In May 1995, I had moved out, determined to regain my sanity and never see her again. Four months later, after some lengthy and intense discussions, I moved back in. That October, we married. She was very eager to have children, but we ran into fertility problems due to her age (she was forty-three) and started costly in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments.

Under tremendous financial pressure, my entrepreneurial side got creative. I was looking around for ways to expand my practice. One morning in 1997 at the monthly meeting of my men's organization, Robert, an acquaintance who was a vitamin salesman, announced that he was training to become a life coach and was seeking practice clients.

A "life coach"? I thought, "Hey, he's going to charge people for helping them with their lives—that's what I do! Is this a gimmick for practicing without a license?" When I asked him what coaching was about, he smiled and told me that a life or personal coach is someone who helps people achieve their goals and live fulfilling lives. At first, I felt threatened that someone without a graduate degree or a license was seeking to help people be happy and charging them hundreds of dollars to do so!

However, intrigued with the idea of personal or life coaching, I researched the profession of coaching on the Internet and discovered a whole new helping profession had been growing right under my nose. Robert offered to coach me for practice at no charge, so I decided to give it a try.

We started with weekly phone conversations. His approach was awkward at first, obviously reading from a list of prepared "coaching" questions. He was trying really hard and I went along. I worked with him on my dilemma about my career, my passion for helping people have successful relationships, and my burnout as a couples therapist. Within a few weeks, I had a breakthrough idea for a new direction for my practice and a whole new vision for my career.

Moreover, this experience piqued my curiosity, and I decided to check out exactly what coaching was all about.

I signed up for training with a large, established professional coaching organization. Its paradigm for helping people sounded familiar to me, given my counseling background, yet seemed very new at the same time. For example, in one exercise I was partnered with another participant and was told to listen and ask questions for five minutes without giving advice or feedback. I could ask questions, but not respond as an expert by telling him what to do or sharing my perspective. This approach to supporting someone was a challenge for the therapist in me! But it was a great exercise in learning how to be present with my client and frame powerful questions that empowered the client to be the expert on his/her life.

I thought: “What if I applied a coaching approach to help my clients in their relationships?” I researched models for relationship coaching, but could find no standard; everyone seemed to be doing his/her own thing. Still, I was impressed by what I had learned and experienced, and I thought seriously about transitioning my practice to relationship coaching.

As part of my introduction to the coaching approach to creating successful relationships, I decided to review and reread a number of the current self-help books on relationships. What I discovered was an oversimplified approach: “Do this” or “Don’t do this.” Yes, relationship self-help books could help couples improve their relationship and singles find a partner in the short term, but not necessarily help find a life partner or create a sustainable lifelong relationship. It was then I decided I wanted to create a comprehensive model for relationship coaching.

At the same time, I was dreading going to my office every day. I knew I was burning out because I was at the point that I couldn’t stand working with my clients anymore. While I had made the decision to work with couples experiencing difficult challenges and was dedicated to keeping them together, I was frustrated with getting so few positive results.

But my discovery of coaching opened up new possibilities and gave me a new direction. One day, I was thinking about the different stages we go through to create a successful life partnership, and I had an epiphany: singles become couples! THAT WAS IT! As a therapist, it had never occurred to me to work with singles. Moreover, I thought that if I started coaching singles and they became couples, I could continue to support them through coaching.

I decided to launch a weekly group in my area to help singles: a “Friday Night Social” in which singles could meet, socialize, and learn about relationships. We talked about how singles could prepare for a committed relationship and set themselves up for success. We outgrew our first space in just three weeks!

In working with singles, I saw a lot of well-educated middle-aged men who worked in the technology industry and who had little clue about how to have a good relationship. I helped them learn basic dating skills, like asking a woman out, and supported them to be more assertive. I met many women who felt they were past their prime, too old, or too overweight. I helped them become more positive and less desperate. It seemed that most singles needed to overcome fears, become more authentic with others, and focus on the big picture of their life and not be in such a desperate hurry to find a relationship.

In January 1998, my wife and I had twin boys. Shortly thereafter, I discovered that she had been addicted to prescription medication for quite some time. I knew there were a lot more medications in the house, but I had assumed they were related to her IVF treatments. She reluctantly went into rehab, relapsed, and went to rehab again multiple times. Finally, the welfare of two beautiful baby boys was at stake. We divorced after two years of denial, conflict, and broken promises.

Certainly in my own life I had made enough relationship choices that didn't work out and learned about unsolvable problems the hard way. As a new relationship coach, my hope was to make the path for others less arduous.

As I expanded my relationship coaching practice, the Friday night singles socials grew more popular. Around this time, I also discovered that many other coaches were holding seminars by telephone to reach wider audiences, so I put together a variety of teleclasses for singles on dating, communication, and other topics. While conducting classes over the telephone was new and awkward at first, I was thrilled at how many people called in from all over the world, and found this new way of teaching to be a lot of fun.

My excitement at the success of my relationship coaching ventures led me to dream big. What if relationship coaching grew so expansively that it resembled McDonald's? Just as easy as it is to find a hamburger anywhere in the world, you could step out your door or pick up your phone and receive solid support with your relationships. How different our world would be! I envisioned how our society would be different if helping professionals from every facet—whether they were therapists, social workers, psychologists, or personal coaches—got together as a unified force to help singles and couples to have successful relationships.

As I entered into this new millennium, I branched further into the world of professional coaching and developed the niche of relationship coaching. At the same time, I had another huge responsibility: caring for my two-year-old twin boys. As their mother continued to battle her addiction to prescription drugs, I needed to adjust my schedule to work more from home and less in the office. (Today she is doing very well, and though we didn't work as a couple, we're good friends and coparents.) Meanwhile, our divorce was finalized and I had legal custody of my sons. With the breakup of my second marriage, having painfully learned about unsolvable relationship problems the hard way, I felt further inspired to help singles prepare for relationships in which they could set themselves up for success.

During this time, I was seeking someone to help me lead the weekly Friday night singles groups so I could spend more time at home. My relationship coaching practice attracted Marvin Cohen, a local graduate student and executive coach who left the corporate world to

become a therapist. Marvin started attending the social each week, even though he was not single! He impressed me with his commitment to becoming a therapist and coach and with his like-mindedness about helping singles and couples from a coaching perspective. Within a few months, I offered Marvin a partnership and asked him to step in to lead most Friday nights. This freed up more of my time for my family and to further develop relationship coaching programs while continuing my private practice. Occasionally, I filled in for him on Friday nights as a leader or gave a presentation as guest speaker.

One night, a divorced mother of two showed up at our Friday night social. Her name was Maggie and she'd read a letter to the editor I had written to the local paper in response to an article about the scarcity of single men relative to single women in the area. Intrigued, she had called Marvin and decided to check out our singles group. This was her first time at a singles event since her divorce a few years earlier. Maggie did not catch my eye that night because I was focused on leading the group. I also believed it would be unprofessional of me to date women who were participants of my programs, even if they weren't my "clients," so I wasn't "looking."

As time went on, Maggie decided to take the Conscious Dating Relationship Success Training for Singles program (RESTS) that I had created and that Marvin was teaching. After the eight-week course, Maggie decided she was ready to attract a life partner, so she placed her profile on Match.com. She described herself as a forty-four-year-old warm-hearted woman, spiritual seeker, mom, social worker, and amateur musician.

Maggie was very specific about what was essential to her: giving and receiving love, her family and community, her work in the world, music, and the natural world. She wrote, "I seek a life partner to share the joy, fun, bumps in the road, and waking dreams in which there is so much for us to learn and discover. I would like to believe that my partner and I could mirror the lightness and darkness in each other and promote the evolution of other and self." Unfortunately, Maggie got very little response to her profile.

In the meantime, I had posted my own profile on Match.com as I felt it might be easier for me to initially connect with women online. Being single again was awkward for me, as I now had a high profile as a “relationship guru” for singles in my area. My headline was, “Romantic Single Dad.” My user name was “3DMan,” which meant that I was three-dimensional in my life as a family man, a businessman, and a relationship-oriented person. I described myself as a forty-three-year-old father who liked to sail, hike, run, and bike. I also specified that I had young twin boys and an older daughter.

Over the next six months, I went out with about ten women I met online. In person, I found them to be very personable, but there was very little chemistry. We also did not have much in common. I could not imagine myself being in a relationship with any of them. I soon began to think that this Internet dating method just wasn’t for me. It took a lot of time to correspond by e-mail, and all my leads seemed to turn into dead ends. I was ready to give up and stay single for the rest of my life.

One day, out of sheer frustration, I changed my profile and made it much more specific, even demanding, knowing it might result in zero responses. For one, I wanted to meet a woman who was a helping professional like me. (I discovered I had very little in common with women who worked in high tech.) I wanted her to share my life’s mission of helping to make the world a better place. Among other things, I wrote that I wanted to meet someone who: loved kids, was relationship-oriented, enjoyed being with family and community, was physically active and enjoyed nature adventures, was spiritual but not religious, spoke her truth with high integrity, was responsible and addiction-free, tolerated and appreciated differences, communicated well, owned her projections, and was ready and available for a committed relationship. I put it all out there and was not going to settle for less!

After three months, I had no responses and was sure I had scared everyone away. I surrendered to the idea that I might be single for the rest of my life. I let go of my attachment to finding my life part-

ner and decided that I would enjoy my life, friends, family, and work as a single person.

Then, one evening, there was an e-mail from Maggie in my inbox. It turned out that we had both been on Match.com all this time; however, our search criteria had missed each other. Maggie had specified men who were her age or older (I was a year younger) and I had specified women who were at least five-foot-two (she is five-foot, one and a half). So, our profiles had never matched up. Out of frustration due to low response to her ad, Maggie changed her criteria and widened her search. When she lowered her age bracket by a couple of years, she discovered me.

We exchanged a few e-mails in which I found out that Maggie was a social worker and had a twelve-year-old son and a ten-year-old daughter. (My daughter was also twelve, and my boys were two.) Maggie was pleased to discover I was the founder of the singles program she attended. She remembered me from that Friday night social. We decided to meet in person (again!).

It was December 3, 2000, and Maggie waited until we got together in person to tell me that it was her birthday. We went on a long walk during which I asked her some tough, straight questions about her past. It was important to me that she (or any partner) have the ability to handle my directness, and Maggie was caught a little off guard. She seemed uncomfortable when I asked her about her ex-husband, and I took this as a sign that she might not quite be past her divorce. However, she later explained that she was struggling to talk about him in a positive light rather than speaking about him harshly.

During this first meeting, there were no big sparks; yet we liked each other and conversed easily. I liked that Maggie spoke to me as David, rather than projecting her experiences onto me because I was a therapist. Unlike many others, she did not seem in awe of or uncomfortable about my credentials; she was a fellow helping professional and related to me as another human being. I really liked that Maggie seemed a very real and genuine woman. I experienced

her as nurturing and loving, and appreciated how she listened to me with such care.

Maggie and I continued to e-mail, talk on the phone, and get together in person. Because she had taken my training for singles, she was familiar with the process of “conscious dating” and comfortable talking to me openly and honestly. Neither of us bought into romantic illusions. We asked each other very direct questions related to our requirements and needs for a life partner. As the months passed, we were both amazed at our alignment. We were developing a deep appreciation of each other and our mutual connection and attraction grew.

Both of us had read *Intellectual Foreplay: Questions for Lovers and Lovers-to-Be* by Eve Eschner Hogan, a book of questions and exercises for getting to know yourself and your partner on a deeper level. We developed an enjoyable routine of talking on the telephone in the evening and taking turns asking each other questions from the book. It was refreshing to see that the more we consciously explored each other’s realities, the more excited we were about being together. Even more, I felt that for the very first time, I was using for myself all the relationship concepts and tools I’d developed in my work.

One weekend a few months after we met, I backpacked alone in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Away from Maggie, I missed our routine phone calls to check in and ask questions from *Intellectual Foreplay*. So, in the dark, I hiked by flashlight to a pay phone near the campground and called Maggie. She was pleasantly surprised and impressed that I had called her from my camping trip. I didn’t have my copy of *Intellectual Foreplay* with me, but when it was my turn, I made up my own questions for her and we kept our ritual.

Eventually, Maggie and I started to get together with our kids, too. As the months passed, we made the decision to date exclusively. Our main conflict, however, was time. Between our work and our children, how could we carve out enough time to be together?

One evening about six months after Maggie and I had met, I asked how she felt about the idea of our moving in together. I knew it was a radical step, but it would certainly give us more quality time together! Maggie was very surprised. She had been raised to believe that you shouldn't move in with a man until you had been dating him for at least a year.

At the same time, Maggie was also impatient to have more time with me, and we were very clear that we were creating a solid long-term relationship. I invited her to move in with me, but we decided that my house was too small for two adults and five children. Conscious of a tremendous commitment we were making to blend our lives, finances, and families, and excited about the direction of our relationship, we went house hunting.

In August 2001, after nine months of dating and two months of house hunting, we fell in love with a home that happened to be in the same neighborhood where my ex-wife and I had lived before our divorce. My daughter was still living there and would now be able to easily walk between her mom's and dad's houses! The house was smaller than we preferred, but we couldn't afford a larger one. So we decided to buy it and build an addition. Today, the three older kids have their own rooms—the twins share—and I have a comfortable office space overlooking our backyard.

Maggie now works as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, dividing her time between her private practice and working for a large HMO, and I continue to build the Relationship Coaching Network, which comprises three programs: Conscious Dating for singles, Partners in Life for couples, and the Relationship Coaching Institute to train helping professionals.

Today, Maggie and I spend less time together than we'd like. However, we're very committed and feel strongly about making our blended family work. We consciously cocreate our relationship and are open about our issues and needs. Sometimes, I need to be more cautious about how I say or do things so as not to hurt her feelings; other

times, Maggie needs to work on communicating her needs directly and making her boundaries clearer.

Having found a soul mate in each other, we plan to marry, but we're in no hurry to set a date. I appreciate our relationship blessings and challenges, and I gratefully believe that she's the best thing that has ever happened to me!

During my personal journey and professional work, I learned that being single is truly an opportunity to create the life that you really want. My hope is that this book will help you seize your own opportunity to prepare for and find the love of your life and the life that you love.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

In this book you will discover how to avoid the many pitfalls and traps that can hold you back in your journey to find your life partner. You will learn effective principles, tools, and information you can use to find the life and relationship that you really want.

Conscious Dating will introduce you to many innovative concepts and tools to help you make conscious, sustainable relationship choices. The first four chapters address “The Mystery of Relationships,” “What Do We Really Want” in relationships, “Why ‘Dating’ Doesn’t Work,” and “The Opportunity of Being Single.”

The remainder of the book is organized around the Ten Principles of Conscious Dating. Following an explanation of each principle, you will find tools, exercises, encouragement, and concrete tips for applying each principle to life and relationships.

The final two chapters cover how to develop a “Conscious Dating Plan” to find a life partner, and how to use a relationship’s “pre-commitment” stage to determine if the relationship is a good long-term choice.

Within each chapter, you will find the stories of real singles who have implemented these dating practices in their own lives. As you

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follow their relationship journeys and learn the principles and tools for conscious dating, I hope you too will gain clarity about who you are and how you can get what you really want in your life and relationships.

Being single is truly an opportunity. Today, a whole new world begins. You are the pioneer of your own life. Let's begin our journey together. ✨

The Mystery of Relationships

1

The media today pay very close attention to singles, offering plenty of advice about how to find the perfect partner. This is no accident: there are more single adults today than ever before in history. While today's singles are more aware than ever about how important it is to make careful relationship choices, it can be confusing and frustrating to be flooded with "guidance" that's often shallow or exploitative. In this chapter, we'll discuss some common questions you might have about why so many relationships fail and why dating seems so challenging.

THE RULES HAVE CHANGED

Every media outlet today seems to be rushing to offer singles the latest solutions to finding and keeping that perfect partner. *Glamour* features "How to Come Back from the Brink," about couples on the verge of divorce who turned their relationship around. eHarmony.com has patented a matchmaking formula to bring singles together in successful relationships. Nerve.com, an online magazine exploring sexuality and culture, is promoting "The Future of Marriage" issue with experts answering all your relationship questions.

We have a powerful need and desire for a successful life partnership. But we grope around in the dark, using trial and error to try to make them work, often learning our lessons the hard way. We have all

made relationship choices that led to feelings of confusion and hopelessness. When we are single, we want to be in a relationship. When we are in an unfulfilling relationship, it is often very difficult to accept the status quo and we want to move on. I believe that we all want to be happy. We're just not sure how.

I initially entered the psychology field to understand and help people in relationships. I wanted couples to be happy together. Yet, during most of my years as a therapist, relationships remained a mystery to me. I wondered, for instance, why so many couples allowed their marriages to become so severely troubled before doing something about it. I also questioned why some couples called a divorce lawyer before calling a therapist. I shook my head at the divorce rate, considering the fact that there are over 350,000 licensed mental health professionals in the United States.¹

***We have a powerful need and desire
for a successful life partnership, which drives us into
and out of relationships.***

**Angela
Raleigh, North Carolina**

Angela, a forty-year-old single mother, was more than mystified with her recent relationship. She was feeling just plain lost. Angela's boyfriend of two years had just split town believing, like Moses, that God was calling him to the desert, literally!

Last Friday, Matt, her boyfriend, had called and said he urgently needed to talk with her. He was never the urgent type, so her heart pounded when she opened the door at 10 p.m. in her cotton nightgown. She'd asked him to whisper, not sure if her son was still up.

“I’ve been packing all day,” Matt said. “My time in Raleigh is through.”

“Packing?” Angela said, dumbfounded. “I don’t understand—”

“I wanted to tell you before,” Matt said, “but I didn’t think you’d understand.”

“Understand? No, I don’t understand!”

“Please, Angela,” Matt said. “Let me explain.”

He went on to tell her that a few days earlier, when he had gone camping alone in the mountains, he woke up under the stars and had a vision. “God commanded me to go to Arizona. He says I’ll receive further communication when I get there.”

Mark San Francisco, California

The ink was barely dry on Mark’s divorce papers when he started to date again. Thirty-five-year-old Mark felt that he’d already spent the last two years of his unhappy marriage grieving and bickering, and was ready to move on. The divorce papers were signed and he had his daughters—ages ten and twelve—every other weekend. This gave the successful marketing manager lots of free time for his new life as a bachelor.

Word seemed to travel quickly that he was single. Socializing with friends for drinks every night also sped up the process of getting out there as a new single. In a short time, his bureau at home was decorated with a number of women’s phone numbers written on cocktail napkins.

Women were drawn to his financial wealth, as he was to their good looks. But recently, he had a wake-up call when his twelve-

year-old daughter told him point-blank: “Dad, women are like Kleenex to you. You use them and throw them away.” That one comment has sent Mark into a period of deep self-reflection.

Cathy
Denver, Colorado

Cathy, age thirty-eight, was grieving the end of her ten-year codependent marriage. Cathy was devastated that she and her husband were splitting up. In a bold move to regain her self-confidence, Cathy signed up for my Conscious Dating Relationship Success Training for Singles (RESTS) class. She’d been battling depression for years and was now reaching out to connect with a more supportive community.

I recommended a book to her—Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends. The author, Bruce Fisher, compared the healing process after a divorce to climbing a mountain composed of nineteen different “rebuilding blocks.” Fisher says it takes time and effort to get past the emotional pain; finishing the climb is what counts, not how long it takes.

Over time, Cathy would let the words sink in. She realized she couldn’t expect herself to wake up happy and different tomorrow; this was going to take time, maybe a long time. But she was committed to her journey to rediscover herself and find her life partner.

Seth
New York City

Seth hopped onto the train to downtown Manhattan for his midday lunch date. At 2 p.m., he would take the train back to work. At 6 p.m., he would meet his dinner date in midtown.

To an outsider, this thirty-year-old gay man's dating life might seem hectic and frenzied. But he was on a mission to find the love of his life. After five years of living in Manhattan, Seth had had enough of the Greenwich Village gay bar circuit.

When he first moved to the city from suburban New Jersey, he was only looking for sex. He had a long string of one-night stands, mostly with muscular white men who were attracted to his "exotic" appearance. (Seth was a clean-cut, five-foot-six first-generation American of Korean descent.) Seth did not want to be anyone's "boy toy" again. He knew that hooking up with guys was easy; the challenging part was staying together.

After his last breakup a few months earlier—the first time he'd lived with another man—Seth came up with a plan for finding his next and, hopefully, last relationship. He placed numerous ads online in search for "a monogamous, honest, intelligent, spiritual, financially responsible partner." Now he was going out on two or three dates a day (lunch, dinner, drinks)—yes, it was a feat! Dating was his assignment, and his life partner was his "degree."

Dorothy Houston, Texas

It seemed like one of the craziest things Dorothy had ever done in her life. The weekend after she had dropped by the video dating office, Dorothy, age fifty-five, sat down to call her potential matches. Each time she reached a man's voice mail, she took a deep breath, trying her best to listen to his greeting, and then said in her friendliest, most outgoing voice, "Hi! This is Dorothy! I got your number from—"

Dorothy had been divorced for two decades. She'd been in and out of short-term relationships, but longed to get married

again. Joining a video dating service for the first time in her life was a very bold move! But when the service sent her ten possible matches, her fear turned to excitement.

ANYTHING GOES

As I stated in the Introduction, there are 101 million singles in the United States, which is 46 percent of the adult population. Twenty five percent of all households are single occupants, compared with 17 percent in 1970. And the marriage rate is at its lowest in thirty years.² I see many singles traveling to a vague destination without a map or compass. They seem unsure of where they are going and feel off-track without knowing why. I like to refer to our society as the Anything Goes Culture. Today, we have an infinite number of choices and, as a relationship coach, I love this! Change brings about personal growth and evolution. But it can also be overwhelming. Without the security of tradition to lean on, singles are often left groping around in the dark.

-
- **101 million singles in the United States, 46 percent of the adult population**
 - **25 percent of all households are single occupants**
 - **Marriage rate is at its lowest in thirty years**
 - **For every marriage, there is about one divorce**
 - **More than 85 percent of all adults marry at least once**
 - **The majority of first-born children are now conceived by, or born to, unmarried parents**
-

With our new freedom of choice come growing pains. As a father, I've seen my children learn about behavior and consequences. A lamp breaks, for example, and a child naively thinks he or she can

lie and get away with it. Children often think magically, and are in denial of reality. However, many adults also are still learning about consequences. We have unprotected sex and get pregnant. Or we jump into a relationship after dating for two weeks and then wonder why it doesn't work out.

Recently, I was discussing these issues with another relationship coach and he said to me, "We've been raised on movies and TV shows to believe that it's all about the romance and climactic moments. Despite popular 'reality' shows, because of the cameras, we never really see the reality of everyday life. It's not about going out into the world and finding that perfect partner. We need to see that we, as individuals, are a part of the big puzzle. This fairy-tale image ignores our responsibility for our choices and adds to our confusion about our relationships."

***It's our responsibility to be conscious
about where we are in life
if we are to find our own happiness.***

In our culture we are goal-oriented and consumer-driven. We want what we want, when we want it. Many of us are concerned with looking good and obtaining certain material things, and we believe that's what will make us happy. But even when we get all those things, we are not happy and we don't understand why. Similarly, in relationships, we pair up and expect to be happy. Once again, we need to understand that it's our responsibility to be conscious about where we are in life if we are to find our own happiness.

Moreover, for many of us, our role models—our parents—are divorced, and there is divorce all around us. For every marriage today, there is about one divorce. More than 85 percent of all adults

marry at least once. The majority of first-born children are now conceived by or born to unmarried parents. And there are more single people today than ever in history.³ When I study these statistics, I find it amazing that so many people are doing this committed relationship thing at all.

And yet, they are. Couples everywhere continue to make their vows. And as I write this, despite political resistance, same-sex couples are tying the knot legally for the first time in history. While many view gay marriage as radical, I see it differently. Gay couples want the same thing everyone else wants—lifelong commitment and family—so they are actually making very traditional choices. What’s amazing to me is that even though we have so many lifestyle alternatives today, we all seem to share a common goal—a fulfilling life partnership.

* * *

At the gym, Angela cranked up the speed dial on the treadmill, imagining that she was the one running away from Matt. “Go, go, go!” she repeated to her herself, beads of sweat dripping down the sides of her face. “He’s such a spoiled brat. He doesn’t know how good he had it with me.”

Her back was wet. She hurried, as if she were late for her own plane.

Matt had been her first long-term relationship since her divorce ten years earlier. Angela knew that divorcing before age thirty was not uncommon. She’d just read a story in the morning’s paper about the so-called “starter marriage,” a phenomenon happening in every demographic of society, in which a union lasts just a few years and ends before children arrive. The article said the most common time for a marriage to end in divorce was in the first five years.

Angela and Matt had celebrated her fortieth birthday the previous month with a weekend getaway to a beach house at Cape

Lookout. Matt had always treated her like a princess. Every Saturday, after her son's father picked him up, she and Matt dashed off to a local bed and breakfast, drank mimosas at brunch, and picked up box seats for the symphony in the evening. Matt had been living off an inheritance for the past few years since his father had died. Angela's salary as a social worker had never afforded her much room to splurge, so weekends out of town with Matt were a treat.

***Angela's salary as a social worker
had never afforded her
much room to splurge, so weekends
out of town with Matt were a treat.***

Still, she was never sure how he spent his days, exactly. Whenever she asked, Matt rambled on about playing bridge, watching basketball, or going fishing. He didn't have many close friends. Matt often talked about moving in together someday and how he wanted to be a role model for her son.

"God, I'm such a fool!" Angela thought. Then she laughed, wondering if she was talking to the same God who had spoken to Matt.

"Hey there," a deep voice resonated from beside her. "How's it going?"

Angela opened her eyes (not realizing they were closed) and turned to see Jerry jogging on the treadmill to her right. He was going much slower than she was.

"Fine," she lied, feeling resentful for the interruption in her thoughts. "And you?"

“What a nice surprise to see you here in the morning. Usually I see you working out after work.”

“Yes,” Angela replied, thinking that if she kept her answers short, he would leave her alone. She wasn’t feeling very social.

Jerry was a tall, athletic, gray-haired man in his mid-forties. They usually ran into each other in the sauna following an after-work workout. Last week, they talked about her clogged kitchen sink. Jerry had suggested a way she could get all that gunk out of her pipes without calling a plumber. Although he was a nice guy and she was impressed by his plumbing knowledge, she didn’t feel like talking to him right now. She focused her blue-gray eyes back on the treadmill screen and sped up her pace.

“Maybe I’ll see you in the sauna,” Jerry said, stepping off the treadmill onto the rug next to her.

“Yeah, maybe.” She didn’t want to meet him in the sauna today, so she decided to wait until he left, even if it meant being late for work. Upset about Matt, she spent this “waiting” time sadly reflecting on yet another failed relationship.

* * *

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Until recent generations, men and women dated, married, had families, and rarely divorced. Not long ago, there were clear rules for relationships—in which couples did not focus on personal fulfillment or happiness—and stayed together “till death do us part.”

Then our society changed. I think that the biggest change impacting relationships is that we’ve developed a need to be “happy.” This is a dramatic shift from past generations who were quite satisfied

surviving and achieving some measure of comfort and security for themselves and their family.

The need for happiness sounds very simple and innocent, but it's the primary reason for failed relationships today. As a consequence, we have consistently high incidences of divorce, single-parent families, mental and physical health problems, juvenile delinquency, welfare, and so on. While we seek to be happy in relationships, we don't seem to know how.

But how did all the rules change, exactly? During the '60s, we saw a tremendous shift in the roles of men and women in our society. As we started to question our tasks in the household and workplace, technology was changing rapidly too. Women now had access to birth control, which meant that sex could be for recreation, not just procreation. In 1973, abortion was legalized and the stigma of divorce was disappearing. With the rise of feminism, women had so many more choices. This dramatically changed the rules and, for better or worse, the dance of courtship changed too.

A couple of generations back, it was the man who asked the woman out on a date and paid the bill. Today, there is no set protocol. The most common response I hear from single women when I ask them who should pay for the date is "We'll go dutch." Moreover, most women are going to drive themselves to a first date, rather than wait by the door to be picked up. Today's woman does not want to be beholden to a man. Sometimes I witness that women feel uncomfortable with this new and powerful role. Other times, it is men who are feeling insecure or intimidated, unsure about how to relate to assertive and strong females.

Having no set rules in dating can be confusing. While many single women prefer to split the bill on a first date, I've heard many stories about women who "test" the man by waiting for him to first offer to pay—even though, in the end, she'll insist on splitting it. And I've heard that some men will "test" a woman on the first date, say, by unlocking the car door on her side and opening it for her,

and then waiting to see if she reaches across and unlocks his door. It seems as if both men and women want to be reassured that if they're going to give, they're also going to receive.

The fact that families look different today has also changed the dance of courtship. Now it's common to have two-career households—in which the woman sometimes earns more than the man—so the role of provider is up for grabs. Many are putting off marriage and childbearing until later in life, focusing more on career and self first. Then, when couples do finally get together, they might hear the woman's biological clock ticking. Or, after the babies arrive, they might have a hard time dealing with the loss of autonomy. Moreover, now that gays and lesbians are mostly out of the closet and in the mainstream, they are creating their own dance of courtship.

In general, I think that we are smarter nowadays, and perhaps more cynical. We fear commitment today more than we did in the past. We no longer believe that tying the knot equals a happily-ever-after fairy tale.

To be sure, there are many cultures around the world that follow the conservative traditions of past generations, in which men and women have very defined roles in a family. This is further proven by the popularity of radio talk show hosts such as Dr. Laura Schlessinger and Rush Limbaugh and by groups such as the Promise Keepers. Leaders such as President George W. Bush are attempting to bring back life-long monogamy with programs to promote healthy marriage.

These groups seem to be clashing with the predictions of some futurists who say that Americans will marry at least four times and have extramarital affairs. One futurist bases her predictions on trends showing women becoming more financially independent, with marriage and childbearing becoming more “delinked,” “serial monogamy” becoming more acceptable, and extramarital sexual affairs occurring more frequently and with less public outcry. She sees singles of the next century moving through at least four kinds of marriages, which are the following:⁴

FUTURIST VISION OF MARRIAGE

1. The Icebreaker Marriage

This has many similarities to the “starter marriage” that was mentioned above. The first union will be “the icebreaker marriage,” in which couples learn how to live together and become sexually experienced. Icebreaker marriages are likely to last no more than five years. Once disillusionment sets in, couples will split up, as divorce will not carry any stigma.

2. The Parenting Marriage

The second marriage, known as “the parenting marriage,” will last fifteen to twenty years. These couples will view raising children as their primary purpose, although child-rearing in the future will be in communal settings, not nuclear families.

3. The Self-Marriage

After the second marriage ends, couples may enter a third union, called a “self-marriage,” in which partners pursue self-discovery and self-actualization.

4. The Soul Mate Marriage

Finally, because people will be living until age 120, many couples will reach for a late-in-life “soul mate connection.” In this fourth kind of marriage, couples will discover “marital bliss, shared spirituality, physical monogamy and equal partnership.”

FUTURIST VISION OF MARRIAGE

- 1. Icebreaker marriage**
 - 2. Parenting marriage**
 - 3. Self-marriage**
 - 4. Soul mate marriage**
-

As the past and future bump into one another in today’s world, singles seem to be focused on these five critical questions:

1. How can I find my life partner?
2. Where do I meet compatible singles?

3. Why, in spite of my best efforts and intentions, do my relationships seem to fail?
4. Why do relationships seem to be so natural and easy for some, and so challenging for others?
5. Why do so many people claim that marriage and family are their highest priorities, and then act indifferent—or even hostile—to those closest to them?

It's an interesting phenomenon that even though we are not following any set of rules, in the end, most of us want to be in a committed relationship. Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, researchers who have conducted hundreds of studies and surveys, concluded that most young Americans want marriage but at the same time fear it. In their book, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, they state that marriage is more than just a sheet of paper. Marriage is an “insurance policy” that more often than not brings couples long lives, good health, fat bank accounts, and personal happiness.⁵

***Marriage is an “insurance policy”
that more often than not brings couples long lives,
good health, fat bank accounts,
and personal happiness.***

—Waite and Gallagher

Yet with this freedom of choice, I see so many singles leaping into relationships without using good judgment. They make choices based on impulse without much conscious thought. What's astounding to me is that when we enter a committed relationship, we do not intend to fail. We truly believe this is going to be for life. I entered

each of my first two marriages with 100 percent commitment. I did not envision myself getting divorced. What motivated me to specialize in working with couples were the serious and traumatic consequences of divorce. Getting together is a natural drive. We are social beings, and getting together with a partner is a strong instinct. In spite of the fear of many singles of being alone forever, relationships happen naturally. We're going to get together anyway. The trick is staying together.

* * *

Angela was a social worker in early intervention and prevention services. At work, she was relieved to focus on something other than Matt and his sudden departure. At lunch, Angela had plans to meet her friend Gretchen at the cafeteria downstairs. They had been friends since college and worked two blocks away from each other. When Angela trudged into the cafeteria, her face was sullen.

"Come here, Honey," Gretchen said. "You look like a wreck."

"Oh, thanks for the compliment," Angela said, half-jokingly. She talked for ten minutes nonstop, telling Gretchen about Matt's urgent call about his "order from God." She gazed out the window. "Maybe he's out in the Arizona desert right now, speaking with God."

Gretchen looked into her eyes: "Honey, you're the one who's just been saved."

* * *

Like Angela, most of us need and want a committed relationship. However, the divorce rate is not going down, and the marriage rate is not going up. I asked a roundtable of relationship coaches what they considered to be the biggest challenges facing singles today. There is still such a stigma about being single in our society, and a

prime motivation for me as a relationship coach is to overcome this.

The coaches came up with a long list of challenges, including:

1. Not knowing what you're looking for; having unclear expectations
2. Having a long "grocery list" and looking for the one person to match it
3. Living in fear that you will repeat past experiences
4. Not healing before starting a new relationship
5. For women, feeling that their biological clock is running out
6. For men, fearing to start a family and stay committed
7. Lowering of standards by older singles, or giving up or settling because they're afraid they will always be alone
8. Knowing where to meet other singles with whom you might be compatible
9. Too busy to date or cultivate a relationship
10. Discouragement of not finding someone that meets your expectations
11. Expectations for sex
12. Cynicism
13. Getting involved too quickly
14. Not knowing where to meet suitable partners
15. "There are no good men, no good women" mentality
16. Pressure from family or peers to be coupled
17. Not having the skills to create a successful relationship
18. Fear of failure
19. Fear of rejection
20. Fear of commitment
21. Shyness
22. Seems easier to stay single

- 23. Exhaustion—children, careers, hobbies consume your energy
- 24. Determining when to introduce children

Today's singles carry around many fears. For those of us who grew up surrounded by confusing relationships—like bickering parents who ended up divorcing—it can be challenging to envision a successful relationship. Many of us have been affected so deeply by our pasts that we carry around negative attitudes about relationships. Many singles are feeling frustrated, discouraged, and cynical about relationships. Yet our biggest goal in life remains to love and be loved by a life partner. ✨

CONSCIOUS DATING PLAN EXERCISE NO. 1:

Please refer to Chapter 15 to write your answers.

Are you ready to date?

1. Have you been hurt in a relationship? How does being hurt affect your being single?
2. Do you believe that happiness in a relationship is really possible? (In subsequent chapters, you will see how your beliefs affect your life decisions.)
3. Do you believe that your next relationship can really be your last? (In subsequent chapters, you will look at how your beliefs affect your life choices.)
4. What do you think a fulfilling life partnership would look like?

THIRD PRINCIPLE OF CONSCIOUS DATING: Be The Chooser

Do you take the initiative to go after what you want? Or do you find yourself reacting to people and circumstances? Learn how to take responsibility for the outcomes in your life by becoming The Chooser rather than playing it safe and limiting yourself to only what's in front of you.

MAKING THE FIRST MOVE

Seth looked inside the folder labeled “Chooser.” After browsing through hundreds of online profiles of men who live in New York City, Seth had chosen three men and composed notes to them. Sending e-mails to complete strangers made Seth nervous. All through his twenties, he had been the follower in relationships. Upon turning thirty, however, Seth had vowed to be more proactive in his life. And now, he was.

Being The Chooser means taking initiative and responsibility for your outcomes: you are in charge of creating what you want in life.

When you're single, you may feel insecure and self-doubting. You may have developed attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that have led

you to feel unsure or anxious about being assertive. You may have been conditioned to please others, or never received permission to take risks. You may feel powerless about influencing your outcomes, so you submissively let others make the choices. You may be so afraid of failure that you don't even try.

When I first started leading singles groups in the 1990s, I saw how many singles lacked the skills and attitudes needed to go after what they want in life. This is what inspired me to come up with the expression "Be The Chooser." I first included this term on an audio tape I recorded, "Finding the Love of Your Life and the Life that You Love." Everyone who attended my events got a free copy of this tape, in which I talked about how you, as a single person, could have a successful life partnership and the kind of life that you wanted. But it seemed that what singles really responded to was when I talked about being The Chooser. So many people came back to me and said, "I must have listened to that tape twelve times in my car. I hear your voice in my head, saying, 'Be The Chooser!'"

***You may have been conditioned to please others, or
never received permission
to take risks. You may feel powerless about
influencing your outcomes, so you submissively let
others make the choices. You may be so afraid of
failure that you don't even try.***

ARE YOU A CHOOSER OR A VICTIM?

As children, choices were made for us and we had little power over what happened to us. This is normal for children, but when we take this attitude as adults, I call it being a "victim." The opposite of

being a victim is to be “The Chooser.” In my own life, I’ve forgotten this fact many times when I was impulsive or reactive. Taking responsibility for our failures and our pain can be challenging. I have wanted to blame my boss, my ex-wife, the other driver, and my parents. Have you?

I’ve had many wake-up calls that taught me to realize that acting out of ignorance or impulse doesn’t absolve me of responsibility for making a bad choice. When I was sixteen and a new driver, I got a ticket for making a U-turn across a double-yellow line. I told the cop honestly that I didn’t know it was against the law, and felt it grossly unfair that he ticketed me anyway. I fought the ticket in traffic court and lost. My only defense was “I didn’t know! I didn’t mean to break the law!” The judge told me ignorance was not an excuse for breaking the law. That was one of my first wake-up calls that as an adult, I would be held accountable for my choices even if they were unconscious. What a scary thought.

Unfortunately, we live in a victim culture. It’s usually the other guy’s fault that we go to war, get into a car accident, lose our money in stocks, or get a divorce. While victim-hood might make us feel better and in the right, it also makes us helpless and perpetuates our problems.

What do you want? A fulfilling life and relationship? A loving family? Success in your work? Peace in the world? I’ve learned that to get what you want, you must be The Chooser. Being The Chooser means taking the initiative to create what you want, taking full responsibility for your outcomes, and making your choices mindful of their long-term consequences.

If you believe you don’t have a choice, you won’t. If you shove responsibility for your choices and outcomes outside of yourself, the Law of Attraction (see Chapter 10) will surely repeat the lesson over and over until you get it. Very often, we are not aware of the range of choices available to us. We are often unaware of our power to choose and of the true power of our choices. We might make choic-

es unconsciously, reactively, or impulsively. We might be unaware of the long-term consequences of our choices.

Choosers know what they want and how to get it.

Choosers take responsibility for what happens and know they are in charge of their lives.

Choosers know what they want and how to get it. Choosers take responsibility for what happens and know that they are in charge of their lives. Being a Chooser takes a certain amount of confidence and effort, but anyone can be one! Finding the love of your life is not about hoping to be picked. You need to know yourself so that you can be The Chooser, rather than waiting to be chosen. Being The Chooser means taking initiative and responsibility for your outcomes: you are in charge of creating what you want in life. You do not restrict yourself to what or who chooses you.

A.I.M. TO BE “THE CHOOSER”

Step 1: Be AWARE that you have choices

You are never stuck! You always have choices, even if you don't know what your choices are. Don't allow impulse or lack of information to result in a poor choice.

Step 2: IDENTIFY your choices

Always assume there are more choices than you are aware of, and seek to identify a variety of the choices available to you, mindful that “you don't know what you don't know.” Identify productive choices and don't settle for unproductive choices.

Step 3: MAKE productive choices

Use all the information available to you to make the best choice

possible to achieve the outcome you desire. Evaluate a choice based upon the likely long-term consequences of that choice.

***Finding the love of your life
is not about hoping to be picked. It is about
knowing yourself so that you can be The Chooser,
rather than waiting to be chosen.***

I confess that every week I tune into reality TV shows, watching as, say, the lovely glowing twenty-something blonde chooses which men to keep on the show and which ones to eliminate. It doesn't matter if it's a man or woman waiting for that rose; regardless of the gender, everyone hopes to be "the one." How many of these singles have fallen into the Fairy-tale Trap? As you will recall from Chapter 3, the Fairy-tale Trap is when you believe that finding your soul mate will just happen. You passively expect your ideal partner to magically appear and whisk you off to live happily ever after—with no effort at all on your part! This is the opposite of being The Chooser.

I want to emphasize here that it is NOT true that some people are born Choosers while others are not. Rather, being a Chooser is something that you DO. If you are holding onto certain behaviors or attitudes that prevent you from being a Chooser, you can change them. Robert F. Bennett, a U.S. senator from Utah, summed up what being The Chooser means:

Your life is the sum result of all the choices you make, both consciously and unconsciously. If you can control the process of choosing, you can take control of all aspects of your life. You can find the freedom that comes from being in charge of yourself.¹

If you want to be The Chooser, here are some things you have control over and can DO:

- **Be Creative:** Seek new ideas and opportunities beyond the immediate past and present.
- **Be a Risk-Taker:** Accept rejection and failure as part of life; don't take it personally.
- **Be Assertive:** Ask for what you want, and say "no" to what you don't want.
- **Be Proactive:** Don't merely react to events, or habitually wait for things to happen.
- **Be Goal-Oriented:** Clearly define and vigorously pursue your goals.
- **Assume Abundance:** Believe there will always be plenty of opportunities and resources.
- **Be Positive:** Always anticipate success.

* * *

The last time we saw Angela, she was figuring out exactly what she wanted in a relationship. Her friend Gretchen had helped Angela clarify her Requirements. In the meantime, Angela had been chatting with Jerry, a man she often saw in the gym, and had accepted his dinner invitation.

The day of her date, Angela had a grin pasted to her face. For months, she and Jerry had been checking each other out at the health club. But Angela knew that flirting with Jerry would have been a mistake. She had taken a risk by accepting his dinner invitation.

Angela was very clear about her goals. Yes, she was dating again, but recreationally this time, keeping her boundaries around intimacy and emotional commitment. She wasn't ready for commitment and didn't want to jump into a mini-marriage again. Her future vision still included a life partner, but not until

her son had left for college. Rushing into another committed relationship would be unfair to him, and probably to her too.

I WANT TO BE THE CHOOSER, BUT...

Seth skimmed over the notes he had sent the men. He had sent one note to an actor whose ideal partner was “very secure in himself, enough to kiss or fall asleep on my shoulder while riding on the subway train.” He had sent another note to a Latino singer who echoed some of Seth’s requirements in his profile when he said he was “looking for a man who is willing to communicate his feelings, who is tender, honest, and passionate about life.”

But the one man whom Seth was most eager to hear back from was a thirty-five-year-old lawyer whose headline read, “Complete Guy Looking for the Same.” This man wrote in his profile that he was “definitely ready to move on to the next stage.” Seth was in the same place. Yet Seth felt a pang of vulnerability: what if this guy didn’t write back? He exhaled, telling himself not to take rejection too personally if the lawyer didn’t reply.

Seth looked out the window, recalling his past five years of dating in Manhattan. At age twenty-four, Seth had finally admitted to himself that he was gay. Still, he had lacked the self-esteem to pursue the kind of relationship he wanted or to even know what that was. He had been the kind of guy who waited to be approached at a bar. He had lived in fear: whenever a man took him home, he dreaded that in the morning his date would kick him to the curb. Seth had not sought out men in places where he might share mutual interests—like an art lecture or an exercise class—and had limited his search to bars. He’d had a hard time saying no to men who were obviously bad news.

But all that was changing now. When Seth and his last boyfriend had moved in together, the emptiness had really eaten Seth up. This boyfriend, gorgeous and wealthy, was a magazine and commercial model who often whisked Seth off to Atlantic City. Yet

his boyfriend was also emotionally reserved, and controlling about with whom Seth spent time. Just days before Seth's thirtieth birthday, he had told his boyfriend that he was moving out.

Seth had realized that he deserved to be in a lifelong relationship that was respectful and loving. He truly believed this could happen if he became more assertive and proactive. Now, when he approached a man and was rejected—for example, by sending a kind note online and not receiving a reply—he didn't let it get him down. He didn't need someone else's approval. He now knew that he could take care of himself and say “no” without fear and guilt that he would hurt someone.

When you resist being The Chooser, you risk ending up in relationships that are not right for you because you are merely reacting to the people who choose you.

When you resist being The Chooser, you risk ending up in relationships that are not right for you because you are merely reacting to the people who choose you. Being The Chooser is about choosing how you want to be. It means asking yourself, “How do I want to show up in the world?”

Seth's date, Jeffrey, was waiting for him in front of the upscale Thai restaurant. Jeffrey had short cornrows and clear hazel eyes. He stood up and warmly shook Seth's hand. Seth felt so welcomed that he laughed out loud. They were seated at a corner table near the window.

Jeffrey started asking questions: “Where did you grow up?” “What's your family like?” “What kind of exercise do you enjoy?” “What do you do to maintain a balanced life in New York City?” Seth liked Jeffrey's confidence. Seth felt open and trusting as he explained that his Korean parents were very conservative and

Christian. He had come out to his two older brothers, but not to his parents.

“I’m in the same boat!” Jeffrey said. “My older sisters know that I’m gay, but I’m in no rush to tell my parents. They are strict southern Baptists.”

Seth added that he was very close to his family and took the train to visit them at least one weekend a month in New Jersey.

“I just bought my parents tickets to New York,” Jeffrey said. “They’re coming to the city for their first time this spring.”

Seth was impressed. This was a man who seemed to be very close to his family, like him.

Being “The Chooser”

is about choosing how you want to be.

It means asking yourself,

“How do I want to show up in the world?”

The two men talked about living in Manhattan. Jeffrey practiced yoga. Seth told him that his dogs really kept him centered. He loved taking them to the dog run at least twice a day, and cuddling with them every night in bed.

“I dream about getting a dog,” said Jeffrey. “But I have two roommates and they’re against it.”

“You’ll have to join me at the dog run one day!” Seth said, feeling uninhibited.

“Great!”

Seth appreciated how assertive Jeffrey seemed to be. Like Seth,

he initiated dialogue and seemed to be a risk-taker. Seth was feeling really comfortable on this date—that is, until he started asking more questions about Jeffrey’s living situation.

“I have an unusual setup with one of my roommates,” Jeffrey said. “I’m just going to be clear and hope it doesn’t turn you off.”

“Go on.”

“When he moved into our apartment last fall, we started sleeping together. It’s just a physical thing, if you know what I mean—”

Seth shook his head.

“We’re just meeting each other’s needs, but we’re open to dating other people. We’re not really together.”

“That sounds confusing,” Seth said, imagining that if he and Jeffrey ever dated, they’d always have to go to Seth’s place to prevent any awkward or jealous feelings from the roommate.

And who was to say that Jeffrey didn’t really have feelings for his roommate? Seth was very attracted to Jeffrey, and it seemed like they had a lot in common. But certainly, Jeffrey was involved with someone and not truly available. Despite Jeffrey’s assurances, Seth was feeling very uncomfortable.

"It's not going to work for me," he said. "I'm ready for a committed relationship with someone who is also ready and available."

Seth took a deep breath. “It’s not going to work for me,” he said. “I’m ready for a committed relationship with someone who is also ready and available. I’m not comfortable with your situation.”

Third Principle of Conscious Dating

“Thanks for the honesty, man,” Jeffrey said. “I’m sorry it’s not going to work out.”

Seth took another sip of tea, proud of himself for listening to his own needs and for being assertive. He said to himself: “I’M THE CHOOSER!” He was choosing to say no to an unavailable man, and yes to what he really wanted.

But back home, Seth fell onto his sofa with a feeling of defeat. This dating thing was exhausting. Could he really keep up with it? He pulled his laptop off the coffee table and logged on. There was a reply from that lawyer he’d written to!

“Hey Seth! Great to ‘meet’ you. Thanks for writing. I’m having a quiet night at home with my dogs. To share a little more about the kind of guy I’m looking for: he is career-oriented and fun to be with. A sense of humor is a must. I strongly believe in the law of attraction. I know that whoever I’m with needs to feel positive about life. On that note, I don’t have a specific type—let the chemistry be the judge of that. I look forward to hearing your thoughts.”

Within moments, Seth’s dinner date faded from his memory. He clicked on the reply button.

* * *

It is not a lack of talent or a genetic malfunction that prevents us from being Choosers. Rather, we have learned, or internalized, a set of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. When you were a child, the adults around you had all the power. Your parents were in charge and made all the decisions for you. So, as you grew up, you had to learn how to be responsible and make choices for yourself. As a child, you might have been punished for making your own choices. No doubt you were conditioned to be a certain way and to have certain values. However, as an adult, you can choose which attitudes and behaviors you want to internalize.

I have a friend whose life is a great example of being The Chooser.

Bonnie Bernell, a successful, happily-married psychologist, is the daughter of a former fashion model and a strikingly handsome physician. Bernell, who is now in her mid-fifties, struggled for years before choosing to love herself as a large woman. As an adult, Bernell chose not to let her parents' attitudes about how she should look affect her self-esteem. She wrote a celebratory book of strategies that large women have found effective to handle challenging situations: *Bountiful Women: Large Women's Secrets for Living the Life They Desire*.

***As a Chooser, you need to
hold true to yourself and stand up
for what you want in your life.***

Perhaps there is still some part of you that wants Mom or Dad to make the choices for you so that you can be carefree and untroubled. That part of you lets the boss hire you or fire you. That part of you lets somebody else ask you out or break up with you. Sometimes, the kid in us feels inadequate, or fears failure. It can be scary to stand up for yourself. Other times, peer pressure is so great that it shadows our decision making. Everyone around you has opinions and will express them generously: "You should really date this man/woman. He/she is perfect for you!" Your friends and family will often disagree with you. As a Chooser, you need to hold true to yourself and stand up for what you want in your life.

ARE YOU THE PURSUER OR THE PURSUED?

Some of us find it more comfortable and socially acceptable to be The Chooser in certain situations, such as with friends or at work. It might be clear-cut and easy for some of us to invest our money in certain stocks, for example, but challenging to approach an attractive woman and ask her out. Some of us might be very assertive

when it comes to playing tennis, but giving a man our phone number is unthinkable. I know many women who are successful, decisive, powerful executives in the workplace, but when it comes to intimate relationships with men, they find it very difficult to be assertive. Fearful of coming across as “unfeminine,” they are submissive. I recall one client, for instance, who was very successful as the president of her Silicon Valley company. But in her relationships, she had a hard time standing up for herself and played a whiny victim. When we enter the arena of intimate relationships, we also cross over the threshold to emotionally complicated issues of gender roles, self-esteem, and sexuality.

***Some of us might be very assertive
when it comes to playing tennis, but giving
a man our phone number is unthinkable.***

Traditionally, there are “masculine” and “feminine” styles of being The Chooser. These do not necessarily match with being a man or a woman. As part of my Ph.D. studies, I took a class in gender differences and was amazed to learn how few real differences there really are. (But you wouldn’t know this by reading John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus!*) In their book *Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children, and Our Jobs*, Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers challenge the Mars and Venus theory of gender relations. They say that overall, men and women are much more alike than different, and will be harmed if they buy into gender myths. Drawing on years of exhaustive research, Barnett and Rivers reveal how a toxic mix of junk science, pop psychology, and media hype has profoundly influenced our thinking and behavior. This has caused us to make poor decisions about how we choose our mates. The time has come, argue the authors, to liberate ourselves from biological determinism. Barnett and Rivers make a plea to end sexual stereotyping so that women and men may realize their destinies as full human beings.²

One scientifically proven gender difference is that men, by nature, are more promiscuous. This means that men are more sexually interested and motivated. Most men will find it very hard to say no to sex. Women, on the other hand, have a lot more to lose when it comes to sex because they can get pregnant. Most women will turn down an offer to have sex if they do not want to.

The stereotypical male Chooser is the pursuer, while the stereotypical female Chooser is the pursued. The stereotypical male Chooser picks an attractive prospect and pursues by initiating conversation, winning favor, and getting the date. This man is like the hunter, and he appears powerful and in charge. The stereotypical female Chooser sends subtle nonverbal signals to an attractive prospect and appears submissively receptive to the responses. Women have been taught to avoid aggression and boost the male ego; their survival and the future of their children have depended on this in the past. So women often appear passive and subordinate, although they can still be quite powerful and in charge indirectly.

As a man, it took me a while to understand the feminine Chooser style. My first lesson came during my first marriage. My ex-wife was very good at saying no. Her initial response to just about anything that had not been initiated by her was resistance. It's a very powerful position! You can stop traffic and win political causes with resistance. I also like to compare the feminine Chooser style to the martial art aikido. In aikido, you use your partner's motion against him/her. A man might look like the pursuer, but the woman actually determines whether this relationship will go further.

Another significant aspect of the feminine style is giving hints, clues, and glances. Most men have not been trained or taught to read that kind of language. My second wife was an extraordinarily feminine person. If she wanted a glass of water, she would say, "You know, I'm thirsty." I thought she was simply complaining about being thirsty, and it took me a long time to realize that she was indirectly asking me to get her a glass of water. In her feminine style, she was giving me an opportunity to be her hero. Still, I spent a lot

of time in the marriage lamenting, “Just make a direct request. Don’t make me mind-read!”

***Our challenge is to learn how to relate to each other
as equals as we develop our own unique blends
of masculine and feminine.***

Media hype has profoundly exaggerated the masculine and feminine styles, causing some singles to make poor decisions when trying to find a partner. TV makeover shows reinforce the myth that a woman must have a “perfect” body and face if she is going to find a man. (The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports that in 2003, nearly 8.3 million surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures were performed. That is an increase of 293 percent since 1997.³)

But men have not had it easy either. Many men today have been raised by single mothers and lack strong male role models. This is reflected in many current television sitcoms that portray men as lazy, foolish boobs who are dependent on smart, competent women. That view is at odds with the 2003 National Study of the Changing Workforce, which found that in dual-earner couples—the dominant family form in the United States—men’s housework chores and child care have increased steadily since 1977.

Both men and women know what their traditional, stereotypical roles are; however, most of today’s singles don’t subscribe to these roles. So, we are often unclear about what to do or expect. Today, traditional gender roles don’t work well for either gender. In recent generations, women’s roles have been greatly expanded beyond being wives and mothers. They expect and deserve equality with men. And, in order to compete with men in the workplace and succeed, women have discovered that they must be more “masculine” and less “feminine.”

Regardless of whether you prefer to be receptive or proactive, being The Chooser means making your own choices.

Some men still prefer to pursue their partners in a traditionally masculine way, like hunters or warriors, while others are uncomfortable being so aggressive. Some women still prefer to bat their eyelashes to make a man feel like a hero, while others prefer to be dominant. In today's world, men and women are free to determine the relationship style that fits them. Still, some men and women wish to be equal, to be involved in relationships where neither party is dominant or submissive, the pursued or the pursuer. This requires that we be aware, intentional, and authentic. These skills must be learned and practiced. We are redefining today's gender roles, which can be confusing. I believe that all of us have masculine and feminine sides. Our challenge is to learn how to relate to each other as equals as we develop our own unique blends of masculine and feminine. Regardless of whether you prefer to be receptive or proactive, being The Chooser means making your own choices.

A Strategy for Being The Chooser:

THE RULE OF THREE

You may have heard that the third time is the charm, and while that has certainly been true for me in my own relationships, I'm not recommending getting divorced twice to find your life partner. The Rule of Three for Conscious Dating is one strategy you can use to be The Chooser. It means that when meeting someone attractive to you, it takes at least three contacts to determine mutual interest and comfort to proceed further.

In the real world of singles, the most anxiety-producing situation occurs when you spot someone attractive to you whom you would

like to meet. This is so stressful that an entire industry caters to singles to help them with this—for a price. Save your money, use the Rule of Three, and be The Chooser. Here is an example:

Let's say you are attracted to the teller at the bank. You could flirt, deliver your best pick-up line, and ask what time he/she gets off. But you wisely anticipate that the person might be uncomfortable with that approach. So, what do you do? Try the Rule of Three:

CONTACT #1: You smile, make eye contact, introduce yourself, ask his/her name, make small talk, pay a compliment, anything you would do to be friendly with anyone in any setting.

The purpose of this first contact is to walk away having left a positive impression.

CONTACT #2: Return to bank within a day or two. Now that you are on a first-name basis, you can start with small talk and add some personal sharing about something important to you related to your Requirements, such as your children or work. Notice his/her reaction: is it positive, negative, or neutral? Having revealed something specific about yourself, you then ask him/her about the topic (for example, "Do you have kids?").

You are seeking to do three things at this step:

- *Discover whether you have anything in common, especially an important Requirement.*
- *Confirm your attraction and interest after discovering some thing real about this person.*
- *Leave another positive impression, this time based upon something real about you.*

CONTACT #3: Return to bank in another day or two. Talk a bit further about what you have in common. Toward the end of the transaction say, "I really enjoy talking with you, and it seems that we have a lot in common. Would you be interested and available to meet for coffee sometime?"

Notice the above is a clear statement about you, and asks about his/her *interest* and *availability*. Asking in this way is typically construed as friendly, nonthreatening, and respectful. You are giving him/her room to decline easily and gracefully.

Most people would be flattered and positive. Don't worry about the people who take you the wrong way; they are simply screening themselves out. You're just being authentic, benign, and innocently friendly. It is very helpful to be unattached to the outcome. He/she can accept or not; you will be fine either way.

ALTERNATIVE #1: If asking so directly is not your preference, you can give the person your business card and say, "I really enjoy talking with you, and it seems that we have a lot in common. Here is my card. I would love for you to call or e-mail if you are interested and available to meet for coffee sometime."

ALTERNATIVE #2: You can repeat Contact #2 as many times as you like to build more comfort and learn more about each other before you decide to try #3.

ALTERNATIVE #3: The Rule of Three for Conscious Dating can be applied to any social setting such as a party, except you would use intervals of fifteen to thirty minutes instead of hours or days.

Initiating contact with people who are attractive to you is essential to being The Chooser. In doing so, remember how important it is to be authentic—especially with your bank teller, because he/she already knows more about you than most of your friends and family!

HOW CAN YOU BECOME THE CHOOSER?

As you know, Choosers define their own styles, preferring, for instance, to initiate or be receptive when meeting someone. Choosers know themselves well and have figured out which dating strategies work for them. Choosers initiate contact with prospective partners.

“We choose our joys and sorrows long before we experience them.”

—Khalil Gibran

I acknowledge that all of us have limits to our choices. For example, if you're gay, you can't wake up one day and decide to be straight. One of my favorite writers, Khalil Gibran, said, “We choose our joys and sorrows long before we experience them.” Still, we all have tremendous freedom in our lives. We can decide what kind of work we'd like to do, what kinds of friends to make, and what kind of partner we'd like to have. In short, we have the freedom to ask, “Who am I?” “What do I want?” and “How do I want to show up in the world?”

To be The Chooser, you need to break free of your conditioning. You need to take risks and go beyond your comfort levels. Every moment of the day, you need to make honest choices to satisfy yourself, not just others. Being the Chooser is a mind-set and a way of living. You are the pioneer of your life! ✨

CONSCIOUS DATING PLAN EXERCISE NO. 7:

Please refer to Chapter 15 to write your answers.

What are your obstacles?

We all have obstacles that prevent us from being Choosers. All of these obstacles have been learned, and they can be un-learned. When reading each obstacle, do a "gut check," and if you experience the slightest physical or emotional reaction, it most likely applies to you. Make a check mark next to the ones that apply to you.

_____ "I'm not good enough" (Having low self esteem)

_____ "It won't happen for me"; "I can't" (Having limiting beliefs and attitudes)

_____ "I must avoid rejection" (Needing to be accepted or conforming to social pressures to feel worthy)

_____ "I don't know how" (Lacking creativity, information or skill)

_____ "It's not ladylike"; "It's not gentlemanly" (Adhering to gender roles)

_____ "I need approval"; "I don't want to hurt anyone" (Needing to please others)

Remember: you can choose which attitudes you want to internalize. You are not stuck with them. Perhaps you won't feel it right away, but if you continue working on this, you will internalize new attitudes and they will become natural to you.

Now, go back to the above exercise and compose an affirmation for each obstacle so that it will no longer be in your way.

For example:

I must avoid rejection, can be changed to, "I am The Chooser in my life. If someone rejects me, he/she is doing me a favor."

Instead of I'm not good enough, you can say, "I am OK as I am, and I deserve to be happy."

Instead of "It won't happen for me," you can say, "It only takes one, and I'm the one."