

1. DISCERNING LIKE A MONK

MARCH 15, 2016

<http://dumplingcart.org/2016/1-discernment-monks-and-nuns/>

In college, I considered becoming a nun. I think I was drawn by the focus, the devotion to a way of life. I even took private vows for a year... thinking that if I stepped away from money, dating, and self-promotion, I could clarify other areas of my life.

Now if I'm fair... I was poor and not surrounded by dates, so it was more about setting aside the *pursuit* of hot dates and great wealth, than giving up the reality! And it was a good year, but also a hard promise to make alone.

What I took away was that life choices are often best made in community.

Becoming a Catholic Monk or Nun

I think about this discernment when I hear about how monks and nuns are made. It goes like this:

1. "Getting to know you." You contact some religious communities and explore their way of life. You attend retreats or meet with a spiritual director to see if you're a good fit for monastic life. Some people compare this to flirting or dating in the relationship world.

2. Candidacy. As an "aspirant" or "candidate," you visit an abbey, convent, or monastery over weeks or months, taking part in prayers, reading, and monastic work. This is like dating gone person: you're getting to know each others' way of life, and seeing if it's a good fit.

(And there are *standards*: candidates to be a Catholic monk or nun should be unmarried, without dependents, and in good health as well as able to pay off debts. They may have doctorates and professional experience, and may have even been married before!)

3. Postulancy. From the Latin *postulare* (“to ask”). You live with the community for six months or a year, without taking on the full set of rules. Perhaps this is like going steady, or making plans with a significant other... there’s serious intent, but you’re still free to leave.

4. Novitiate. A novice takes on religious clothes and *a new name*. As the *Benedictines* wryly comment:

“We might have a few difficulties with something unusual like “Railroad” or “Peachblossom”, but we’ll deal with that when we come to it.”

This is serious. You commit to two years in the community, living in prayer, labor, community life, and fasting, while also studying, developing spiritual practices, and discerning if this is really your life path.

I guess it’s like living together while engaged. It’s quite serious, but you’re still discerning. After two years, you choose whether to take vows, or go back into the world. As the *Trappists* write:

“If, after two years, it is seen that the novice truly seeks God, and is zealous for the work of God, obedience, and trials, and is well suited to community life, silence, and solitude, then she may be admitted to temporary profession of vows.”

So again, you’re discerning whether this life really suits your gifts and callings. As Maria von Trapp found out in the *Sound of Music*, it’s not for everyone:

5. Temporary vows. Next, a *junior monk* or *junior nun* takes monastic vows for three years of giving up sexual expression, personal luxuries, and independence, and obeying God and religious leaders. This is perhaps most like a three-year contract marriage... a serious and a full commitment and taken with deep thought and faith, but not yet for life.

6. Solemn vows are the last step, taken until death. The nun or monk becomes a full and permanent member of their community. This can only be dissolved with a dispensation from the pope.

Thoughts: I'm not planning to be a nun, but I remain intrigued by this path. I'm drawn to the idea of discerning your life over time, in relationship with the people around you, and with increasing commitment to a way of life. I appreciate how people are gradually immersed in life and studying, letting them test themselves and the relationship before committing to a path.

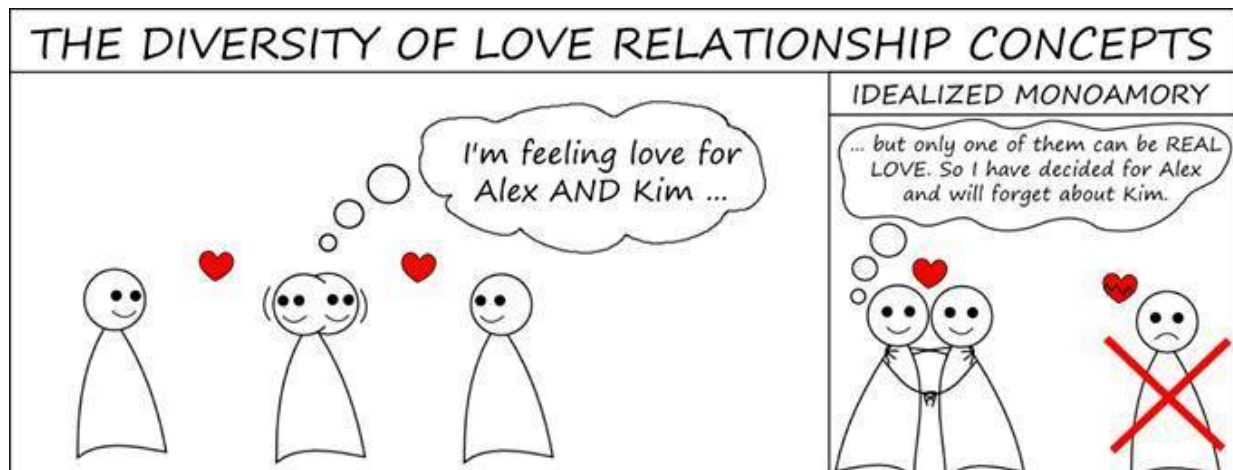
To me, this recognizes that a hastily-formed vow can harm—and that our discernment can shift over time. Yet it still appreciates how powerful, good, and useful our commitments are. I find this especially interesting in contrast to paired relationships, which you read about below.

2. THE RELATIONSHIP ESCALATOR

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<http://dumplingcart.org/2016/2-discernment-and-riding-the-relationship-escalator/>

So that *path to becoming a monk or nun* looks very different from America's "*relationship escalator*." You know, the one that moves *smoothly* from dating to relationship to engagement to marriage to children, in perfect happiness:



Or as Jenna McCarthy puts it in *her TED talk*, two million American couples each year make:

“a legal and spiritual decision to spend the rest of their lives together, and not to have sex with anyone else...ever... then they go shopping for all sorts of things.”

But there are a lot of mental, social, and economic bumps in that path. For instance, *romance and passion* fade; economic and lifestyle conflicts tear at us over time; *conflicting cultural schemas* push the man into work long hours and push the woman to do more at home, even if we started out as equal partners. And when this doesn't go smoothly, we gossip about Jack being 'afraid of relationship,' or *Jill not 'trying hard enough' and 'failing' at marriage or life.*

Love, Inc. creates a lot of pressure. And we try to adapt: talking with friends, seeking wise counsel, reading books, testing out multiple relationships, or just pushing and praying harder to make it work. But so often, *our attempts to "fix" ourselves with therapy* are quiet and individual, acquiescing to the default cultural model of relationships.

Christians and the Relationship Escalator

The monk or nun path is also a huge contrast to conservative religious norms of sexuality in America today. We push young people into a quick and committed courtship, engagement, and lifelong vow, making sure they *don't have sex before marriage...* but then leave them to deal with the fallout afterwards, in their marriages. And given that we made a vow... well, there's no ethical way out.

Both the contemporary path of "hooking up" before relationships and the religious path of rushing into marriage feel odd to me. Instead, I find myself drawn to the thoughtful immersion, honest, and time-limited commitments that prospective nuns make as they explore a calling.

But I love relationships, and I love my guy, too. So I write this to push back at the contradiction. Why is the church so discerning about inviting people into lifelong vows in religious communities... but so quick to push us into relational vows? Why let a monk test whether this is his path for a time, or for life... and not allow people in paired relationships the same opportunity to explore marriage in the same serious way?

I hear critique of young people for living together or taking time before marriage, but I wonder if they're doing their best to discern in the absence of paths laid out for them.

3. ALTERNATE RELATIONSHIP PATHS

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<http://dumplingcart.org/2016/3-discernment-and-alternate-paths-for-commitment/>

One path doesn't work for everyone, *as I wrote* before. So people are starting to discuss just what an honest commitment means. *The New I Do* suggests that young couples—and even long-married folks—discuss their values and goals in a relationship, before making or reaffirming a commitment. In this model, you could choose:

A “beta” marriage, for discerning your path together.

- Like a monk taking simple vows for three years, a *3-year term marriage* or *junior vows* let couples commit to a relationship, while not promising more than they can deliver.

A parenting marriage, for raising children in a stable home.

- Instead of passion, partners choose a good person to co-parent with until the children are grown.

A companionship marriage, for sharing life with each other.

- It may not be sexy or exciting, but offers stability and a partner in life.

A safety marriage, for insurance against poverty, loneliness, or sickness.

- If money or security is a core need, it's better to be honest and form a relationship that meets those needs.

A covenant marriage, when life-long commitment is itself the goal.

- Hard to legally dissolve even in the face of serious problems, this relationship is for life.

Living apart together, for those who want a balance between intimacy and freedom.

- Young professionals may work in different cities, or retirees keep separate houses nearby.

An open marriage, when honesty in allowing some liaisons outside the primary bond is a value.

- Obviously this doesn't work for most religious folk, but for others it allows commitment to coincide with variety.

Multiple marriage, for when more is better.

- Polygamy is illegal in America, but it's common to take *multiple husbands or wives* elsewhere. The American version is either "poly" relationships with multiple people, or a sequence of legal marriages and divorces, aka "serial monogamy."

Are people going for this? Well, in one *recent poll*, young Americans were interested in all models. Which suggests that we want commitment, but we also want something healthy that *works, not just grinding our teeth and waiting it out until death*.

One Path to Relationship?

So young folks are skeptical, because we've realized that relationships don't always work, and often *rely on old gender divisions* that don't match our current lives... *even as religious folk*.

Yet we're still encouraged in a thousand overlapping ways to *fall in love* with one person, with whom we'll share friendship, intimacy, therapy, career encouragement, public status, appreciation of each other's art, social security, enduring romantic and sexual passion, skills in co-parenting and managing a household, and shared spiritual values and life goals. For the rest of our lives.

But what if it doesn't work?

The odds are 100 to 1 that you'll both *find* and *be* that person, at the right time, in the right place, and for the rest of your lives.

Yet even if you wanted to set aside the ideal and just embrace the beautiful reality of two ordinary people... *which part do you give up on? Which part is essential? And what commitments are you actually making?*

4. LOVE MEANS CARING FOR EVERYONE

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<http://dumplingcart.org/2016/caring-for-everyone/>

Given these many ways of doing relationships, I want us to look at *all* paths: single life, community life, or partnership with another person.

Given the Bible's focus on not making hasty vows, I'd challenge my fellow western Christians not to pressure young people to make lifelong vows before they're ready.

(But what about sex? I get the concern, and believe it's important for every person to have a sexual ethic. A Christian ethic may mean a focus on mutual giving, lifelong commitment, and a partnership *for* family, calling, or community, not just for two people enjoying themselves. For many, that means abstaining outside of vowed relationships. Yet pushing people to make vows just to avoid 'sex outside of marriage' seems like a bad path.)

In light of the monastic model, I wonder if we'd be better off *discerning* how our lives fit together over time.

Why do pair bonds matter?

Well, pair bonds are important. Around the world, humans tend to live in couples and families. For Americans, couplehood is where we find emotional and sexual intimacy, build houses, care for children, the sick, and the elderly, and pool money and resources against future hard times.

Yet as Jenell Williams Paris notes, pushing young people into either marriage or celibacy isn't *enough* to meet all our needs.

Healthy humans *need* friends and intimates. We need sensuality and bodily expression, giving and receiving love, care when sick, companions in our old age, someone to call us on our shit, a landing space in case of tragedy, and wider social meaning and connection in life.

And we need all of those things whether we're married, single, divorced, or widowed.

Strong, wide communities

The way American society is set up, we ask *marriage to do all the work* of providing for love, sex, childcare, economic insurance, and social security.

Yet many humans will never marry. Others marry late. Many have a spouse that dies young, or find themselves divorced or deserted. Pushing people into pair bonds doesn't provide the care that everyone needs.

So even if we marry young, and even if we keep our promises, most of us won't be in pair bonds for our whole adult lives. As Laurie Essig says in the [video](#) above:

“Capitalism sells us an ideology, *romance*, that makes us ignore material reality in favor of fantasy.”

Our material world is important. In America today, we need affordable shelter and education, we need love and friends, we need meaningful work and a political voice.

But “true love” can't do this for all of us. Finding the partner to float a little love-and-economic-sufficiency boat isn't enough.

Instead, **caring means caring for everyone, not just the people we're in love with, not just our children.**

It means being more honest about what we expect from relationships, and it means cultivating supporting relationships beyond the pair bond. And it means sorting all of this out together, in community.

I come across strong, I realize that. But I'd love to encourage a discussion—to ask you, dear readers, the stories you tell about love, caring, and relationships.