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Pure Sex, Pure Love Stop Looking for Your Soul Mate!

By Dr. Christine B. Whelan

Recently, my friend Angela called me in tears. Angela, 31, and her husband have been married for three years and they are very well-suited: They can spend hours at a time together talking and laughing, are attracted to each other, get along with each other's friends and families, and are on the same page when it comes to faith, politics, and financial matters. But recently, she told me, the "glow" had worn off. The two were involved in their own careers, and in moments of exhaustion, each had said some hurtful things to the other.

"He was supposed to be my best friend. He was the one who said he could never hurt me, but he has. I thought he was my soul mate, my everything, but now I'm worried I made a mistake," she said, sobbing.

"That's why you have friends and family, too," I said. "He should be your husband, not your everything."

Silly Love Songs

Angela's fears are increasingly common: When young Catholics marry today, some 88 percent say they want their spouse to be their soul mate, first and foremost, according to a recent survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. The quest for a soul-mate marriage is a modern trend: If you'd asked young Catholics this same question 50 years ago, you would have gotten very different responses. Indeed, the CARA survey found that older Catholics are less likely to say marrying a soul mate is a top priority.

It's very romantic, really, and the stuff love songs are made of: You live your life as best you can alone, and then one day you meet your other half, the person who completes you in every way. This person always knows how to make you laugh, how to make you feel cherished, and will never hurt you.

But looking for a soul mate—and believing your significant other or spouse is your soul mate—can be a recipe for disaster in modern relationships. Some 20 percent of American couples file for divorce before their fifth anniversary. Could we be setting ourselves up for disappointment after the first blush of passion fades?

Click

Yes, finding a true friend—someone you click with, someone with whom you can share your emotions and communicate well—is central to making a good match. But the idea that there is one person who will fulfill all our needs, one soul mate out there for each of us, is a childish idea that should be put aside with the Tooth Fairy.

When Americans talk about soul mates, they mean someone whom they love, and who loves them, who will make them as happy as they can possibly be for all time. Everything will be easy with your soul mate. With this person by your side, there's nothing you can't do. The inverse of this, of course, is that if you make the wrong choice, you will be less happy, things will be less easy, and you will accomplish less than you could have had you found your real soul mate.

On average Americans are getting married later in life. This means we meet a lot of different people, and most of us date a fair bit before we marry. There are all sorts of benefits to later marriage—we're older and wiser—but there's one troubling theme I hear from so many men and women: The longer we wait for marriage, the more convinced we are that we deserve a soul mate, a perfect match in every way.

The quest for a soul mate makes it hard to find a spouse and puts unnecessary pressure on your relationship once married. Here's why:

Mr. or Ms. Perfect

First, in this search for our supposed soul mate, we don't know what to look for. Are you looking for someone who has similar taste in music? Who makes you go weak-kneed? Are you looking for someone just like you? Are we sure we are prioritizing the right things on our list of characteristics for Mr. or Ms. Perfect?

While the vast majority of singles say they are looking for a soul mate, nearly half (43 percent) of unmarried Catholics say it is “not at all” important that their spouse be Catholic, according to the recent CARA report. Perhaps our priorities are out of whack. If we are confused about what a “perfect match” should look like, we're likely to overlook some perfectly wonderful people for very silly reasons and are inclined to prioritize more superficial aspects of someone's personality or interests more than issues of shared faith.

Second, we've put far too much emphasis on one person to provide all our happiness and fulfillment. It's wonderful to share your life with someone, and the closeness a couple can foster through marriage is a powerful and precious bond. But few successful

relationships exist in a vacuum: Our individual happiness and fulfillment come from all sorts of interpersonal interactions with friends, family, coworkers, and community.

We're setting the bar too high when we say that your spouse must be your soul mate, meeting your every emotional need. It's perfectly healthy to shop with girlfriends, watch sports with the guys, and complain about your parents to your best friend from high school—not your spouse.

Mature Love

In fact a strong social network is crucial to keeping your intimate relationship in working order past that first blush of love. If you have isolated yourself with your soul mate to the exclusion of your friends and family, to whom will you turn when you have a fight with your spouse? Disagreements and hard times are normal—and often necessary—within a growing relationship, and since a marriage is made up of two fallible human beings, we all need some help along the way.

Finally, mature love is more valuable—and more enduring. The search for a soul mate is a symptom of the consumer culture, says William J. Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota: We are looking to acquire a person who will complete us in the same way we acquire an iPhone to make us feel cool. “Of course, once inevitable tension and conflict arises, I might conclude that in fact this was not my soul mate—and I can justify leaving and setting out on a new quest,” he says.

Two people don't need to be soul mates to have a fulfilling relationship. “When the soul-mate glow wears off, the real marriage can start—based on mature love that is sustained by daily practices of kindness and connection and tested by conflict and struggle,” says Doherty, who wrote *Take Back Your Wedding* (BookSurge) with daughter Elizabeth Thomas.

For Catholics, marriage is a sacrament and a vocation—and married life (ideally) is a visible image of the love that God has for us and the bond that God has with us. While words like sacrament and vocation are increasingly unpopular ways to think about marriage among young people, these traditional teachings may be the better bet to make your relationship last. The idea that your spouse is your soul mate is a very individual-focused way of looking at marriage. Thinking of your marriage as a vocation within the Catholic community may offer the community support that a long-term relationship needs.

Romantic Individualism

“We've been swamped by messages of romantic individualism,” says Mark Regnerus, associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, who studies the religious and sexual attitudes of young adults. “Those ideas can lead people to marry, but can lead you out of the marriage just as fast when things get tough.”

So if we let go of the soul mate notion, are we simply settling for second-best and making do in life and in love? Doherty advises singles not to settle but to be more thoughtful about what characteristics make a great mate. “Look for someone you admire, someone whose values you respect, someone who treats you lovingly, someone who appreciates family life and lasting commitment, someone who shares similar life goals, someone who communicates well especially in conflict, and of course someone you feel an attraction and spark with.”

He encourages couples to be more realistic about marriage through premarital counseling. “Marriage is not a magical state,” says Doherty. “It’s a relationship that requires commitment, intentionality, and skills in interpersonal relations to reap those special rewards of closeness and love.”

Letting go of the idea of soul mates allows us to build the skills necessary to create that powerful bond of love in a long-lasting, stable relationship.

Or, as my father-in-law frequently quips, “I can be right, or I can be married.”