

Forget the “Rules” and Live in the Real! - Shattering the Marriage “Myths”
Does Carrie Bradshaw’s way make sense? The Messages from “Sex and the City”
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It’s summer, long considered the “traditional” season for weddings. But do we really want to continue to buy into the old fairy tales we all heard growing up? Seems like women keep expecting to find the handsome rich prince who will come along on this century’s version of the white horse (expensive late model car) and they’ll jump in (on the passenger side of course, because the guy isn’t likely to let you drive his car) and off they’ll ride into the sunset and “happily ever after.” Right away that scenario provides one of many reasons for the high divorce rate in this country. Then again, look at the messages our popular culture keeps putting out there for women. Difficult to escape, especially in this summer of the latest “Sex and The City” revisit - the film version.

Like so many other women, I grew up with the fairy tales - Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White. Meanwhile, little boys were reading about Thomas the Tank Engine and Clifford the Big Red Dog and Curious George, none of which have any underlying marriage messages. With all of that confusion of messages early on sometimes I’m amazed that men and women ever get together for marriage at all. Seems like women dream about the romance associated with those fairy stories and have unrealistic expectations of how marriage is ‘supposed to’ be. At the same time, many men decide to get married when they think they are ready to have children, or when they have everything ‘lined up’ elsewhere in their lives - job, house, career, etc. They are focused on the practical side of getting married vs. the romantic ‘happily ever after’ notions that women have. Two completely separate ideas trying to blend together - frequently an uncomfortable and conflict-ripe situation.

Back to those fairy tales. They all end the same way, don’t they? Handsome prince shows up to ‘rescue’ the central female character, who gets up on the white horse behind him (or, if the prince is a door-opening kind of guy, he helps her up onto the back of the horse), and off they ride to ‘happily ever after’ land. Seems like a perfect ending, with the whole fade to black thing, right? Cut to an average Tuesday night, when Cinderella or Snow White or Sleeping Beauty finds herself arguing with Mr. Perfect Handsome Prince about whose turn it is to lower the drawbridge over the castle moat to take out the trash. We hear the female character saying, “You’re not the man I married. If you really love me, you’re supposed to do anything for me without my needing to ask you.” And we hear the prince reply, “That works both ways, because if you really loved me, you wouldn’t nag me to do things according to your timetable of the way you think things should be.” Another glimpse into the ‘rules’ - those five phrases we all hear in our heads from our families, schools, religious and other social groups, even societal norms - should, must, ought to, supposed to, have to. If only we could open our heads, take out that five phrase cassette tape (or nowadays I guess I need to say cd) and trash it - how much calmer and easier life would be!

That’s right, even when the fairy tale’s female character achieves her dream of marrying the perfect handsome prince, there are disagreements, disillusionments, and

disappointments. Maybe that's why fairy tales have the fade to black endings - they're fairy tales, not at all grounded in reality. In fact, real, true, lasting love begins when the infatuation/romance stage of a relationship flies out the window. The infatuation stage of a romantic relationship is what feeds the female addiction that starts in childhood with those fairy tales. The addiction continues through the teen years with events like the first kiss, first date, sweet sixteen parties, school dances, prom, etc. It is reinforced by the culture in which we live, where we start talking to little girls from a very early age about how beautiful they will be when they are brides, and so on. Or we ask a little girl about her 'boyfriend' at the pre-school. We don't necessarily ask little boys that same question, do we? And so it goes into and throughout the adult lives of women - romance novels, 'chick lit' and 'chick flicks' such as that most fantastic of unreal modern-day fairy tales - "Sex and the City."

Here again is a setup for conflict with men. Frequently I have heard women say their male significant others don't want to read the books they read or watch the films they want to see. Our culture seems to be doing so much to keep the genders in somewhat adversarial positions. And while we're on the subject of all of this feminine-driven information, let's go back to the fairy tales. If little girls are reading these stories and having the expectations of how a prince is 'supposed to be' then why aren't we training little boys to be that way? Little girls are trained to be princesses throughout their lives, but we aren't giving the same parallel training for the boys to be able to fulfill their 'expected' duties as the perfect handsome prince. Sadly then, no wonder there are so many arguing and divorcing couples. If both members of the couple don't have the same 'rule book' issued to them, they are at cross purposes almost from the start.

I took the time to see the "Sex and the City" film as research for this article. I didn't have HBO when the series was on television, but I rented the series when it came out on dvd and of course it's impossible to avoid seeing the series re-runs nightly on commercial television, on a number of channels. I came away from the film with the same mixed feelings I had when watching the series, and I noted a number of different messages and/or myths about men and marriage. One character's husband cheats on her in the film, and at various time she is told by the other women that she 'should' forgive him. I'm still trying to understand the basis for these women insisting this is what she 'should' do. This character is a strong working woman and has a child too, and I remember from the series that at the time of her pregnancy she chose not to marry the father of her child. Later on in the series she decided to marry the father, because she thought she loved him after all. In the series episode when this character and her husband decided to get married, they actually said what they didn't want, not what they did want. Perhaps there's another profound message there. Whenever I am working with clients I will ask them about what they want and inevitably they will tell me things they know they don't want. Then I need to go back and ask them again to tell me something they DO want, which is often much harder for many people. Taking a look at this character in the film I see someone who is continuing to ignore her warning signs about people and is caught up in self-doubt. When she does attempt to be true to herself and her beliefs, she is told by her closest women friends that she is wrong for the choices she makes, hence the second guessing and self-doubt. Maybe she needs to think about expanding her network of

female friends. She says at one point to her husband that she changed who she was for him. I agree that we all do this in romantic partnerships to some degree; we go from a me to a we. If we choose this, to give up parts of ourselves in an effort to create healthy reasonable compromise with our special lifetime someone, then the trade-off is hopefully worth that sacrifice. If our hopes are realized, it is because our romantic partners are doing that same set of trade-offs, and there is appreciation and acknowledgment on both sides. However, nobody holds a gun to our heads when we choose to take the step of aligning ourselves to romantic partners for life in a marriage relationship. And let's go back to where we dated them for at least a few minutes, right? Therefore we can't say we didn't notice something about them that maybe set off a red flag warning. All the more reason to have belief/faith in oneself and be clear about things we DO want for ourselves and allow this certainty to extend to our choice making when it comes to romantic partners. As my mom used to say (and still does!), "This is not an area for compromise." I know what she actually means by that is, "Never settle!"

Another message coming from the central character in the film is it's perfectly all right to be in a romantic partnership with an emotionally unavailable detached male, as long as he is handsome, tall and rich and buys you an apartment on Fifth Avenue. Never mind that he has been married twice before. Never mind that he has hurt you emotionally with his 'timetable' or 'space' requirements or whatever other excuse du jour so many times you're out of fingers and toes to count them. If he's tall and handsome and rich (there's that prince theme again playing in the background), then it's all right to hold yourself emotionally hostage to what he wants. Oh, and by the way, go right ahead and give up your own apartment that you worked so hard to purchase for yourself. Throw your own livelihood and financial security over the side and align yourself with someone who doesn't know how to be for you, and with whom it seems you can't really be yourself. So forget about your wanting the big wedding with the fancy dress. If you want to marry your perfect handsome rich and emotionally unavailable prince, you 'have to' do it his way, in a simple white suit at City Hall. Wow, what a setup for this character to be guaranteed a lifetime of loneliness, because she is with someone who hasn't the vaguest idea of how to anticipate and/or value her emotional needs. This guy is constantly saying he's sorry, mainly because he's always doing things he needs to be sorry for. What I would love is for the central character to be with someone who gets her needs from the door. She is bright, talented, interesting, funny, successful, and a thousand other positive adjectives. But when it comes to this tall, dark, handsome, rich and emotionally bankrupt man, she turns into a 'princess' waiting to be 'rescued.' And of course by keeping herself caught up with this man emotionally she doesn't allow anyone else in, and if someone else does attempt to get closer, she is constantly comparing everyone else to this unavailable man. What is it about this character's emotional background that keeps her going like a moth to an unattainable flame when she could have her choice of available and caring men? Is it that old thing about the excitement of the chase? Spare me.

My favorite character is the one who chooses to walk away from the handsome rich man after several years of a romantic relationship. She knows this man loves her and she is aware that he values her. She has feelings for him because he stayed with her when she went through cancer. She chose to move away from New York to Los Angeles where

she manages his daytime television career. What she realizes is that she has let her priorities go by the wayside as she has continued in the relationship with this man. She has allowed his needs and his world to eclipse her own. When she wakes up to her own needs, she knows the relationship is over, and she tells him that she loves him but she loves herself more. Selfish? Absolutely. However, I believe there is another man for her out there who she hasn't met yet, someone with whom she won't end up losing the other parts of herself. And by walking away from something that isn't meeting enough of her needs, she may be closing a door but she's opening a different window to new and perhaps better possibilities. A risk to be sure, but empowering nonetheless. From the series and in the film, I appreciate this character because she doesn't waste time on self-doubt or apologizing for who and what she is. She is herself from start to finish, and she takes decisions one at a time, makes a choice and moves on to the next decision. I applaud this character for sending such positive messages about being a woman and being self-aware and self-celebrating.

Lastly, there is the woman who, in the series and the film, was all about having the home, the husband and the children, but she had to go through a first marriage in order to get what she currently has with her second husband. In fact this character more than the others is all about the 'rules,' and her first marriage had all of the rule-based outward trappings - big wedding, fancy dress, a certain kind of proposal, registering for gifts at Tiffany's of course, bridal consultant, and so on. The groom (which is code for prince) 'had to' be a rich handsome doctor who just happens to be (again!) emotionally distant/unavailable. And of course there was her 'plan' to have a baby because that was on her list of 'supposed to' items to check off. Never mind that her first husband wasn't really on board with a baby once they discovered this character had only a slight chance of becoming pregnant. Forget about his ambivalence and forget about his letting her know that he cared for and loved her and could be happy in a marriage that didn't include children. It just wasn't part of this character's plan, period! In the series when this character got married for the second time, she seemed to throw away all of the 'rules' and found the best and most happy arrangement which suited both her and her husband perfectly. However, there are one or two little details about this character that are worth mentioning. Conveniently, as her first marriage ended, she received the enormous Park Avenue apartment as her 'consolation prize.' She had also chosen to stop working, so how convenient also that another financially successful man (who happened to be her divorce lawyer) showed up to take that working 'burden' off her. Considering that she really loved her job, it's a shame the message being sent by this character is that the man is the most important thing and don't worry about ditching your professional aspirations. Pretty short-sighted considering her first husband was who she left the job for, and then her first husband left her! And her second husband let her know that he had promised a dead relative that he would only marry someone Jewish and this character is not. Therefore she chose to go through the process of converting to Judaism. Are we expected to believe there are no other men in New York City who would be a better fit for this character than her first husband and for whom she would not necessarily have to have changed her religion? And while we're on the subject, how about if this character would also really let go of the 'rules' for five seconds and take a look at how great her life was on its own? Here's another character who is bright, beautiful, intelligent,

cultured, lovely. But I recall from the series that she was completely caught up in the endless search for Mr. Right, who 'had to' be taller, handsome, wealthy, successful in his own career, and so on. Again, it was all about finding the man, checking off the items on the list of the 'must haves.' And when she did the first time, it was so difficult for her to get off the runaway train she had created for herself around her first engagement and wedding, even after red flags were appearing everywhere. I remember from the series as she is standing at the back of the church at her wedding and it seems as if she is trying to talk herself into being happy with this choice she made, but there was a deer in the headlights look that nobody could miss. Wouldn't it have been so great if she would have turned, walked away from that first marriage and saved herself the heartache of the divorce? She most likely would have found her 'meant to be' man eventually, but perhaps continued to do her own personal growth professionally and emotionally as well.

I'm for women (in fact, this would be good for both genders) choosing to be a little more conscious rather than going into fantasy mode when it comes to a lifelong partnership based on romance. I know every situation teaches us something, but I think we can learn the things we're meant to learn without having to go through a divorce situation. We spend more time and consideration on so many other decisions that could be thought of as minor. But when it comes to romantic partnership, so many women (and men too) go into a kind of trance and let go of everything that is important to them if there is someone available for a dating relationship that might be 'going somewhere.' Scary.

One little moment in the film leaves me with some hope, and I'm glad the writers threw this in. The central character is reading a fairy tale to the female child of another character, and at one point she stops and says to the little girl that it is only a fairy story and things don't always happen this way in real life. The little girl nods, even though she hasn't the faintest idea of what the central character is talking about. But how wonderful that just for a moment this character, who is so caught up in her own trance with her own guy, can step outside of herself to give an empowering message to the next generation of women.

Yes, I know this is only a television series and/or film, but I talk to women all the time in the various aspects of my life, and I keep hearing the same old messages that tell me they are taking this film and series and other films and series like them seriously. I have heard women of every age say they want to "find the rich guy so I can stay at home and just have the kids and I won't have to work." When I hear something like that coming from a younger woman, I realize how important it is for us to continue empowering ourselves as we move forward with our own goals in our own lives. I do believe in 'meant to be' in terms of romantic partnership, but I also think of it in terms of what I hope to accomplish for myself. I am not against marriage at all, and have no intention of ruling out the possibility for myself in my lifetime. But I'm not putting the rest of my life on hold waiting for marriage to come along and find me. My life continues forward as it has been for quite some time with so many fascinating and fabulous things happening along the way; things I am responsible for and of which I'm so very proud. The 'meant to be' I connect with is the one where I continue to formulate new goals, dreams, plans,

directions for my own life - work, success, friendships, travel, romantic partnership with the most wonderful special someone, and many more.

While it may be impossible to completely destroy the mental cd that keeps playing those five phrases over and over, it's worth the work of learning to turn down the volume on it. Ladies (and fellows too!), throw away the learned 'rule book' and make up new ones of your own, the ones that work best for your own lives just as they are, right this minute. From my personal experience, I know happiness began when I did the work of turning down the volume on my own five phrase 'rules' cd. The happiness I have today has nothing to do with what anyone else told me I should, was supposed to, had to, must or ought to do with my life. It's all about what works for me - heart, soul, mind, spirit, choice. Take your own time, make your own decisions, listen to your own internal messages, the ones that make sense and keep your self-esteem intact. Focus on what's happening right now, today, and remember it's not the destination, it's the journey. When you embrace that concept, when you really own and value your own life, it's likely that your best romantic 'meant to be' partner will come along to share that journey with you. Either way though, you'll earn the reward of living a balanced life.