

# I wasn't ready for marriage

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I met my wife on eHarmony. I was a morning rock DJ in Delaware, she was living in Maryland and finishing up her degree. I drove two and a half hours to pick her up for our first date. I spent most of my bi-weekly paycheck on tickets to a dinner theater in Baltimore. The rest went to gas and tolls.

And that's the way it would go for the next year and a half (minus the dinner theater part). Once a week, I'd spend money I didn't have and drive the 260 mile roundtrip to see the love of my life. Sometimes I'd sleep for a few hours in the guest room at her mom's house, waking up at 2AM to head back to the coast for my 5:30AM radio show.

I was very tired back then.

And broke.

Lord, was I broke.

She'd take turns driving my way, burning gas she couldn't afford to burn and using money that should have been collecting interest in a savings account. On occasion, we'd cut ourselves (and our cars) a break, meeting in the middle for an intimate meal at the Cracker Barrel near the Bay Bridge. It was in these moments that I knew I was fulfilling her girlhood dreams. Oh, it might be a cliché, but it's true: most young ladies grow up fantasizing about the day that a small market radio jock from Delaware will whisk them away to the Cracker Barrel in Stevensville.

It was a fairytale romance.

Or maybe not; but it was ours. It was our relationship. It was real. We loved each other. We were building something.

When we tied the knot in October of 2011, we were vowing our lives to the other person, even though we'd never lived in the same state. We'd rarely spent more than two consecutive days with each other. We didn't know all of each other's bad habits. We didn't know what the other was like on a day-to-day basis.

We had no nest egg, for that matter. We'd blown most of it funding our trips back and forth.

In other words, we weren't "ready" for marriage. We hadn't tried it out. According to conventional wisdom, we were "unprepared." We didn't take a turn in the Marriage Simulator. We didn't live together for seven years and slowly glide into it. We were two, apart, only dating — courting, really — until we were one. We were unmarried, and then we were married.

No transition.

No warm up.

We weren't ready for kids, either. We didn't get any practice swings. We had no kids, and then we had two kids. We weren't parents, and then we were parents. We slept at night, and then we didn't.

If there's one thing about life that I wish everyone would consider — particularly my peers, and those younger than me — it's that you'll never do the big things if you're waiting until you're ready to do them.

You'll never be ready.

*You. Will. Never. Be. Ready.*

You can't possibly understand the reality of marriage — the joy, the commitment, the love, the anger, the pain, the hope, the fulfillment, the excitements, the banalities, the journey, the sacrifices, the rewards, the journey — until you're in it. Same can be said for parenthood, only more so.

How many people have been scared away from the altar because of this phantom notion of "readiness"? How many marriages destroyed because, confused and struggling, one or both partners suddenly decided that they were "never ready" to be married?

Look, I wouldn't presume to give marital "advice." In my life I've met a few people really qualified for that job, and I'm not one of them. But I come across this "divorce is high because people aren't ready for marriage" shtick quite a bit. Predictably, it's mostly unmarried folks who say these things. And it only results in more and more people my age hesitating to break out of the cocoon of adolescence and get going with their lives.

We commonly view living together as a logical step before marriage, but it isn't. It's something some people do, but it isn't a step to marriage. Your marriage is defined by the commitment you make to the other person — not by the bathroom or mortgage you share. Living with someone is not a "warm up" for marriage or a "try out" period, precisely because it lacks the essential, definitive characteristic of that permanent commitment. You can't comfortably transition into an eternal vow. You make it, and then it's made.

Period.

The absolute worst thing that I often hear in defense of the "marriage tryout" strategy is this: *"I need to find out if she/he has any annoying habits."*

Answer: yes. Yes, she does. So does he. But if a bad habit or an annoying tendency could be a deal breaker, then well, you aren't ready.

In fact there is, as far as I can tell, only one form of "not ready" that should possibly stop you from walking down that aisle: immaturity. If you are prepared to dump someone you profess to "love" because they chew with their mouth open or leave wet towels on the floor, you have a maturity issue. And remember, it's YOUR issue.

Perhaps the problem isn't that we consider our "readiness" before we get married; it's that we consider it wrongly. We run down our checklist like we're buying a car.

*Do I have enough money? Is there any single solitary flaw in this other human being that might make me wish I'd gone with another model? Do they have everything I want? Have I driven it enough to know if it has any kinks or mechanical issues? Will it breakdown in three years? Will I be able to sell it for parts and buy something better when I get sick of this one?*

These are the wrong questions to ask. Incidentally, I can answer them all for you: No, you don't have enough money. Yes, they have flaws and kinks and issues of all kinds.

There. And so what?

The real checklist ought to have only four items.

*Do I love this person? Can I trust this person? Can they trust me? Do I have the maturity and strength to give myself to this person, and to serve this person, every day for the rest of my life?*

I can't tell you how you'll answer those questions, but I can tell you what my answers were before I said "I do" to Alissa:

Yes, I love her, but I don't really understand love or what it means. Yes, I trust her, but I don't understand trust or what it means. Yes, she can trust me, but I will still come up short in ways I cannot yet predict. Yes, I have the maturity, but I still have a lot of growing to do.

And then we clasped hands and walked into that wild unknown.

We've been in it for only two and a half years. We still have plenty to learn. There are, no doubt, challenges up ahead that we could never anticipate.

We aren't ready for them.

But we'll meet them when they come.

That's marriage.