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# TEEN*2*

SAVING OUR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES  
FROM THE TORMENT OF ADOLESCENCE

*The Landmark Program  
for Awakening the Inner  
Adult in Every Teen*



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## Chapter 8

# Young People Can Love

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*And they called it puppy love  
Oh, I guess they'll never know  
How a young heart really feels  
And why I love her so.*

—Paul Anka, “And They Called It Puppy Love”

**Overview.** *Contrary to popular belief, psychological research suggests that young people are capable of experiencing mature love, and no one has ever shown that the love experienced by young people is any different than the love experienced by adults. Moreover, although it's widely believed that young marriages are doomed to fail, census data show that males who marry in their teens have a lower divorce rate than males who marry in their twenties; in general, the divorce rate of young people isn't much higher than the divorce rate of adults, and many of our nation's most celebrated and long-lasting marriages have involved very young spouses. In other countries people still often marry at very young ages, and Western attempts to change such practices have sometimes produced disastrous results. Laws restricting marriage or sexual relations involving minors are wildly inconsistent from state to state, and in many cases such laws have been applied in ways that have caused great pain to innocent people.*

“If you have trouble, you go talk about it, argue, and get over it.” That was the advice of Mary Onesi when she and her husband of just over eighty years were interviewed by the Associated Press in 1998. They had been honored on World Marriage Day in 1995 as the longest-married couple in America, and, yes, they were still together three years later. She married her husband Paul in 1917 when he was twenty-one and she was thirteen. By all accounts, their marriage was happy and successful, and it was certainly prolific.<sup>1</sup>

Paul Onesi came to the United States from Italy when he was fifteen, arriving through Ellis Island. He worked in the coal mines in Pennsylvania at first. He met Mary when he was renting a room in her older sister's home, and it was the sister who did the matchmaking. The couple moved to Niagara Falls a few years after their marriage, where Paul went to work for Union Carbide. They had six children and saw five of them celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversaries.

Laura Cerrillo, one of Paul and Mary's twenty-eight grandchildren, explained why marriages in this close-knit family were generally quite successful: "In our family, no one ever wanted to get divorced because no one wanted to tell them."

By current thinking, there's something dreadfully wrong with his pretty picture. Thirteen-year-old Mary Corsaro couldn't *possibly* have been ready for marriage. She must have been abused or exploited or perhaps even drugged and raped. Her sister Rose must have been in on it, perhaps serving as a pimp and getting a fee from perverted old Paul. Isn't that the way we're now taught to think? At the very least, the world must have been so different back then that the people in it must have been entirely unlike people are today—members of a different species, in effect. Maybe Mary *was* ready back in 1917, but there are no Mary's in today's world. Today, thirteen-year-olds are children.

### CAN TEENS EXPERIENCE REAL LOVE?

Can teens love, and can they form successful, stable marriages? Is teen love truly just puppy love, or can it be just as real and deep and enduring as adult love? And, most important of all, *are we willing to face the truth about these issues?*

Romeo and Juliet are regarded in much of the Western world as the paradigmatic romantic lovers; we celebrate their love as the purest and most intense two people can achieve. Their deaths, so tragic on the one hand, also created an undying love that has already been cherished for more than four hundred years. Just how old were Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet?

Perhaps this will help: in George Cukor's 1936 film rendition of the play, Romeo was played by forty-three-year-old Leslie Howard and Juliet by thirty-four-year-old Norma Shearer. Ian McKellen was thirty-seven when he played Romeo with the Royal Shakespeare Company in England in 1976. And in a recent ballet version of Shakespeare's masterpiece, Juliet's part was danced by Evelyn Hart, one of Canada's most celebrated ballerinas, then in her late forties. So perhaps Romeo and Juliet were approaching middle age.

On the other hand, Baz Luhrmann's famous 1996 film version of the story

starred twenty-one-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio and seventeen-year-old Claire Danes. That doesn't seem to jive with the earlier characterizations. And Franco Zeffirelli "stunned the screen world" with his 1968 film rendition, which starred seventeen-year-old Leonard Whiting as Romeo and fifteen-year-old Olivia Hussey as Juliet. Who got the ages right?

Zeffirelli was closest to the mark, but still not stunning enough. In Act 1, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's play, Lady Capulet has a frustrating exchange with Juliet's nurse, trying hard to pin down Juliet's exact age, which, it turns out, is thirteen (just a few weeks shy of fourteen). Even more notable are Lady Capulet's remarks to Juliet about age and marriage:

*...younger than you,  
Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,  
Are made already mothers: by my count,  
I was your mother much upon these years  
That you are now a maid.*

Ironing out the Shakespearean kinks, Lady Capulet is saying: "Here in Verona, upstanding women are already mothers when they're younger than you," and, by the way, "I had you when I was your age." She then tries to interest Juliet in an attractive suitor named Paris.

Why has no one ever made a film or cast a play in which Romeo and Juliet are played by actors of the correct ages? (Shakespeare is never entirely clear about Romeo's age, but it's unlikely that he was beyond his mid teens.)

The same question can be raised about the movie version of Nabokov's infamous *Lolita*, as well as about *West Side Story*, the 1960s version of *Romeo and Juliet*. In Nabokov's book, *Lolita*, the sexy young siren who is the object of her stepfather's obsession, is twelve years old. In the 1962 movie version, she's played by a sixteen-year-old actress, Sue Lyon; in the 1997 version, she's played by seventeen-year-old Dominique Swain. And *West Side Story*'s Maria was played by twenty-three-year-old Natalie Wood.

The question is all too easy to answer: we're somewhat willing in principle to acknowledge that young people can be sensual, sexual, romantic, seductive and loving, but we would never put a real thirteen-year-old "girl" or "boy" in bed with someone for entertainment purposes in a mainstream film. In fact, under modern law, producers who made such a film could be prosecuted as child pornographers. Even Louis Malle's controversial 1977 film, *Pretty Baby*, in which

twelve-year-old Brooke Shields starred as a young prostitute, was careful to avoid having Shields do anything remotely sexual.

There's something very absurd—and perhaps even dissociative—going on here. We recognize, and sometimes even celebrate, young love and young sexuality, *but we will not allow it to occur with real young people.*

So on stage and on film, for the time being, anyway, we're stuck with more than our fair share of arthritic Romeos and Juliets. As the distinguished Shakespearean actor Ian McKellen said about his own stint as Romeo, "I remember at thirty-seven trying far too hard to look, run, leap, climb and dance like a teenager."<sup>2</sup> Of course, the real problem here is not our tendency to miscast actors. The real tragedy is our tendency to dismiss all young love as mere puppy love.

### **Are Teens Really Just Puppies?**

And we call it puppy love—or "calf" love, in some countries. Literally, it's a love between two pre-pubescent animals. When we dismiss the love between two human teenagers or between a teenager and an adult as illusory—that is, when we compare young people who have mature sexual organs to puppies—we are admitting undeniably that we still consider them to be children. We are also demonstrating an extreme form of wishful thinking.

Teens are not puppies. Girls generally begin puberty between the ages of eight and thirteen, with first menstruation (menarche)—an event that indicates the ability to conceive—occurring two or three years later. The median age of menarche for young women is about 12.5. Boys begin puberty between nine and fourteen. A number of experts agree that the onset of puberty has been occurring earlier and earlier in recent decades, perhaps because of improved nutrition and medical care. Let's not panic, though. Although signs of puberty—pubic hairs and breasts—are appearing earlier, the median age at which menarche occurs has stayed fairly steady for decades, and possibly even for many centuries.<sup>3</sup> In any case, by the time most young people reach thirteen or fourteen, they are almost fully mature sexually. Young males are shaving, young females are menstruating, and most young teens are capable of procreating.

Young people are also capable of experiencing romantic love, and no one, to my knowledge, has ever come up with a legitimate way of differentiating the kind of romantic love teens experience from the kind of romantic love adults experience. On the contrary, as I noted in Chapter Six, when Diane Dumas and I looked at love and romance from a competency perspective we found virtually no difference between the competency scores of teens and those of adults (also see Appendix 2).

## Can Teens Really Love?

Dismayed over the lack of attention scholars and scientists have paid to teenage love in recent decades, Wyndol Furman of the University of Denver, B. Bradford Brown of the University of Wisconsin Madison and Candice Feiring of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey assembled an impressive team of scholars a few years ago to take a serious look at what modern Romeos and Juliets are really experiencing. The result was a weighty collection of papers called *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*, published by the Cambridge University Press.<sup>4</sup>

Here are some of the conclusions reached by Furman and his colleagues about teen love:

**Romance as Central.** Teens in much of the Western world are obsessed with romantic love. In the United States, it's the subject of 73 percent of rock music songs, and no other topic comes close in popularity. It's also the most common topic of television series featuring teens. According to one recent study, romance is also by far the most common topic on teens' minds—ahead of family, peers and school.

**Major Theories Are Ignored.** A number of major theories of psychological development—most notably the neo-Freudian theories of Erik Erikson and Harry Stack Sullivan—emphasize the important role that romantic love plays in teen behavior and development. Sullivan argued, for example, that a teen's interest in romantic love is the inevitable outcome of his or her struggle to reconcile changing intimacy needs with lustful feelings—in other words, that friendship and emotional intimacy are the teen's primary needs. But researchers have largely ignored such theories, according to Furman and his colleagues, possibly because “teenagers' romantic ventures do not fit well within the basic constructs or foci of dominant theories of social or interpersonal development.”<sup>5</sup>

**Dismissed as Frivolous.** Even though during much of human history teens often entered into successful marriages, researchers have fallen victim to the same shoddy idea that dominates most of Western thinking today—namely, that teen love is just puppy love. Until very recently researchers have simply dismissed it. According to the authors, “this perspective seems shortsighted.”<sup>6</sup>

**The Possible Primacy of Love Over Sex.** There is a vast literature on teen sexuality, but researchers virtually never consider “the idea that romantic liaisons or relationships are primary contexts for adolescent sexual activity.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, our biased perspective leads us to believe—and leads even serious researchers to believe—that sex comes first for teens, and romance second. But it's possible and

in fact likely, say Furman and others (consistent with Sullivan's perspective), that intimacy needs are actually the *primary* ones for most teens—that love leads to sex and not vice versa. After all, only about half of United States teens actually experience intercourse itself. If teens were simply lustful animals overcome with lust, the proportion would be much higher. There's more going on in teens than animal lust.<sup>8</sup>

**High Turnover.** Nowhere in the Furman volume does teen love ever get dismissed as illusory or frivolous. In fact, the romantic relationships of teens seem to differ from those of adults mainly in one respect. Teens move in and out of relationships extremely fast. But is this a sign of immaturity or just another manifestation of the artificial extension of childhood? After all, we make it difficult or impossible for young people to marry, so it's unrealistic for them to think of entering into long-term relationships. We isolate them from potentially more mature, more settled partners; it's unlawful, after all, for a minor to have sex with an adult, although minors can generally have sex with each other with impunity. And we loudly dismiss their feelings as half-baked, so teens themselves probably have doubts about the validity of what they're experiencing. To top things off, we also corral large groups of young people, often against their will, into crowded pens nine or ten months a year. It should surprise no one that teens shift partners frequently.

But the issue we need to keep addressing is *potential*. Just because teens in the United States, subjected to bizarre restrictions and absurd messages, isolated from adults and warehoused under unnatural conditions, usually don't form lasting relationships, does that mean they *can't*? What if teens were raised to believe that the love they feel is valid and real? What if they were allowed, and perhaps even encouraged, to marry or to form long-term relationships? What if they were allowed to develop romantic relationships with older, more mature partners who could help accelerate their emotional development? What if their lives were more family or work based, rather than school based? Is it at least *possible* that teens would form relationships as healthy and successful as the relationships formed by adults?

## OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES

If you consult your television or newspaper for answers to these questions, you'll probably find wrong ones. But if, as I noted in the early chapters of this book, you look at our evolutionary history, our own not-so-distant past and other cultures, clear and correct answers emerge. There is simply no question that many or most teens are capable of feeling and expressing romantic love, and many are also capable of entering into successful long-term relationships.



## Teen Marriage in the Distant Past

Earlier in this book I looked at the very different way that society viewed young people before the Industrial Revolution. I focused on labor, education and justice issues, but romance and love follow similar patterns. From Biblical times (see Chapter Twelve) until the Industrial Revolution, it was common for young people, especially young women, to marry. In ancient Egypt and Rome, for example, historians believe that it was common for brides to have been as young as twelve, and some brides were as young as eight or nine. Because the burden of supporting a family fell on the male, young men had to be working before they could marry, and hence they were typically fifteen or older.

This pattern had probably been in place for thousands of years before Rome was built, and it continued to some degree until about a hundred years ago. In Europe in the Middle Ages, for example, it was common for women to be married by fourteen. Men married later, again because they needed to be able to support their families.

At least three American first ladies married when they were still “children” (by current standards): Elizabeth Monroe married president-to-be James Monroe in 1785 when she was seventeen; their marriage lasted until her death in 1830.<sup>9</sup> Rachel Jackson, eventually the wife of President Andrew Jackson, was first married to Lewis Robards; they married when she was seventeen and divorced when she was in her early twenties, apparently because she couldn’t tolerate Robards’ extreme jealousy.<sup>10\*</sup> And Eliza Johnson married future president Andrew Johnson in 1827 when she was sixteen and he was eighteen. They were married for nearly fifty years and died within six months of each other.<sup>11</sup>

Even in modern times, first ladies sometimes married fairly young. Rosalynn Carter started dating Jimmy when she was seventeen and married him in 1946 at age nineteen, and Barbara Bush started dating the elder George when she was sixteen, got engaged to him at seventeen and married him in 1945 at age nineteen.<sup>12</sup> Both marriages have lasted lifetimes.

## Teen Marriage in Other Cultures

Around the world, it’s still common for people to marry young, although pressures from Western culture, especially from American culture, are challenging the ancient patterns (Chapter Three). This is especially ironic given that our own system of marriage is the least successful in the world: 50 percent of first

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\*At least she thought they were divorced. When she married Jackson in 1791, her divorce wasn’t really final, and Robards sued her for adultery. The Jacksons remarried in 1794 but were haunted thereafter by rumors of bigamy and adultery.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Purity, Virginity and Wishful Thinking

*In 2007, more than four thousand Father-Daughter Purity Balls were held in the United States. Started by conservative Christians in the late 1990s, the events are punctuated by a ceremony in which daughters kneel beneath crossed swords and pledge to retain their virginity until marriage. Studies suggest, however, that the pledges have little effect on premarital sex other than to reduce birth control and condom use.<sup>13</sup>*

marriages here end in divorce, as do more than 60 percent of second marriages.<sup>14</sup> Divorce can damage children for a lifetime, and it's economically devastating to many families, especially to ex-wives. Unfortunately, as other countries adopt our practices, their divorce rates—and the devastation divorce brings with it—are increasing rapidly.

I can't overemphasize the importance—and ugliness—of this inexorable trend. Every aspect of our culture, propelled by syndicated TV sitcoms, fast-food chains and glitzy Hollywood movies, is being spread worldwide, no matter how trivial the cultural phenomenon and no matter how harmful the effect. Anorexia—unheard of until recently in countries such as South Korea, Japan and the Philippines—is now becoming a serious problem, and healthy diets, such as the fish-and-rice regimen of the Japanese, are rapidly being replaced by french fries and Big Macs.<sup>15</sup>

One of the things we're exporting is our distorted picture of young people. Through movies such as *Clueless* and *American Pie* and television series such as *Beverly Hills 90210*—seen by more than two hundred million people worldwide—we tell the world in vivid terms what we believe about teens: that they're overgrown children, that they're inherently wild and irresponsible, that their love is just puppy love, that their relationships are fleeting and superficial, and that they need adult protection. A movie like *Clueless* is typically translated into twenty languages and shown around the world within months of its original release. No religious zealots on earth have ever proselytized as vehemently as Corporate America.

Meanwhile, many of the old marriage practices remain. In Afghanistan, Niger and the Congo, for example, the percentages of young women ages fifteen to nineteen who are already married are, respectively, fifty-four, seventy and seventy-four.<sup>16</sup> In some cultures, one reason for early marriage is to protect young women from the risk of becoming pregnant out of wedlock. According to one survey, in Niger nearly half of the women who married before age fifteen married for this reason.

## Traditional Marriage Practices in India

In India, the law requires that a woman be eighteen before she can marry and that a man be twenty-one. But upwards of 450 million people—about 40 percent of India’s population—simply ignore the law. It’s not only common for teens to marry; true child marriages are commonly performed, sometimes en masse.<sup>17</sup>

One recent article describes a ceremony in Madhogarth, a small village in Rajasthan, in which Hansa, the youngest of six sisters who were being married to boys from another village, was married to Sitaram. He was twelve, and Hansa was four. An account of another masse ceremony—this one in Rajanawagaon—gives some of the reasons villagers have for flaunting the law. A Ms. Bunkbai, whose three grandsons were married that day, explained that she had recently been ill and that she wanted to see the faces of her grand daughters-in-law before she died. Her husband added that it was risky to let young men get too old without marrying; he spoke of a young man of eighteen who had recently eloped with a married woman. Another villager commented, “What if the girl is not beautiful when she grows up? No one will want to marry her.” In this particular village, the elders explained that only children over ten were being married these days; years ago, they said, even infants were sometimes married off.<sup>18</sup>

Ms. Bunkbai, by the way, had attended one of the “sensitization camps” run by the national government’s Department of Women and Children Development. These camps familiarize people with the marriage laws and even get potential offenders to recite pledges that they won’t violate the laws. But the old practices are dying hard, perhaps because *Clueless* hasn’t yet made it to the rural areas.

Through Western eyes rural Indian marriage practices seem immoral. A four-year-old can’t make a reasonable decision about marriage, and how could any civilized culture contemplate putting defenseless children into relationships that require sex?

But when you set aside your preconceptions and try to understand what’s really happening when very young people are married in India, Indian practices don’t look so crazy. K. Santhaa Reddy, a member of India’s National Commission for Women, sheds light on India’s child marriages as follows:

*A marriage in rural India is not just a relationship between two individuals. Marriages form the backbone of the networking that is essential for survival in a world where the idea of state providing protection seems an alien concept. Urban mind tends to ignore this concept of marriage and looks at marriage in its western form. In Europe and America, marriage is a license to have sex and procreate. In all communities where child marriages are prevalent, the sexual aspect of marriage is absent at the time of marriage.*

*In fact a child marriage is so essentially different from a normal marriage, that it should be called an engagement rather than a marriage. After such a marriage, the girl does not go with her husband. She continues to live with her parents. The marriage is not consummated for many years. When the girl and the boy attain maturity, another ceremony (called “Gauna” in North India) is held. It is only after Gauna that the girl can meet her husband. The marriage is consummated only after Gauna.*

*The custom of Gauna has not been recognized by Indian lawmakers who treat marriage as a one-step process while in many communities of India, it is a three-step process. The first step is primary fixing up of the marriage. At this stage some token gifts are engaged between the two families. The second stage is marriage where the rituals of *sapta-padi* and seven circles of holy fire are performed by the bride and bridegroom. The third step is Gauna or *Bidaii* when the bride is sent to the bridegroom’s house. In urban India, the second and the third steps are held in quick succession, say within a few hours time. But in rural India, the three stages are distinct and often have a time gap between them.*

*Almost all problems that one mentions about child marriages seem to be a result of the inability of the law to come to terms with the customs prevailing in society.<sup>19</sup>*

As odd as this system may sound, it appears to serve a number of constructive purposes, and it’s also not necessarily harmful. Bear in mind that this system of marriage is practiced by more people in India alone than there are people in the United States; one can hardly dismiss it, even it offends. It’s also notable that although divorce is legal in India, the country has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world—less than a fifth of the divorce rate in the United States.

Reddy also points out an absurd discrepancy that’s surprisingly common in many cultures, as well as in some states in the United States: in India, it’s legal for women to consent to sex at age sixteen, and there’s no minimum age of consent for males—but it’s illegal for young people to marry for several more years. In effect, by discouraging marriage the culture condones and encourages pre-marital sex.

Meanwhile, government agencies in India, spurred by UNICEF and other Western-oriented NGOs, continue to discourage marriage by people under eighteen and fail “to come to terms with the customs prevailing in society.” Again, we want everyone to walk our walk, even if we all end up stumbling.

## THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT TEEN MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

In *Everything You Need To Know About Teen Marriage*, writer Eleanor H. Ayer claims that “a girl [sic] married at seventeen is twice as likely to be divorced as a

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Anything to Get Away from Home

*I was doing anything I could to stay away from my house—hanging out with anyone of any age. I was eleven and fully developed; I could even get into bars sometimes without being carded. Mark was thirty-one, and I was using him to stay away from my mom. When I got pregnant, I knew I had to get rid of it because I had no way to support it. Mark wouldn't help, so I finally told my mom, and she helped me get the abortion. It was no big deal, even though I was already four months pregnant. It was ten days before my twelfth birthday.*

—Liz C., now age twenty-four

girl eighteen or nineteen. If a girl waits until she is twenty-five the chances that her marriage will last are four times better.”<sup>20</sup> You’ve probably heard something like this before, and indeed we now teach our young people that they should wait before marrying, in part because with greater maturity their marriages will be more likely to survive.

It’s not clear, however, where Ayer got these numbers, and they don’t necessarily tell us what we want to know. After all, if one out of ten eighteen year olds gets divorced, but *two* out of ten seventeen year olds get divorced, Ayer would technically be correct. But that would still leave *eight out of ten* seventeen year olds with successful marriages—hardly cause to discourage young people from tying the knot.

### Practice Doesn’t Help

Marriage and divorce statistics compiled by the United States Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics paint a complex picture of the role that age plays in divorce. First of all, as I noted above, about 50 percent of first marriages in the United States end in divorce and more than 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce. The divorce rate for third marriages is higher still. Practice and advancing years are no guarantee of success when it comes to marriage.

There is also a curious similarity in the curves that describe the divorce rate in the United States and the median age at which people first marry (Figure 8.1). Between 1950 and 1990, the divorce rate increased fairly steadily, and so did the median age of first marriage.<sup>21</sup> If the age at which people married played a significant role in the longevity of a marriage, we might have expected the divorce rate to *decrease* as the marrying age increased. Again, getting older doesn’t necessarily help.

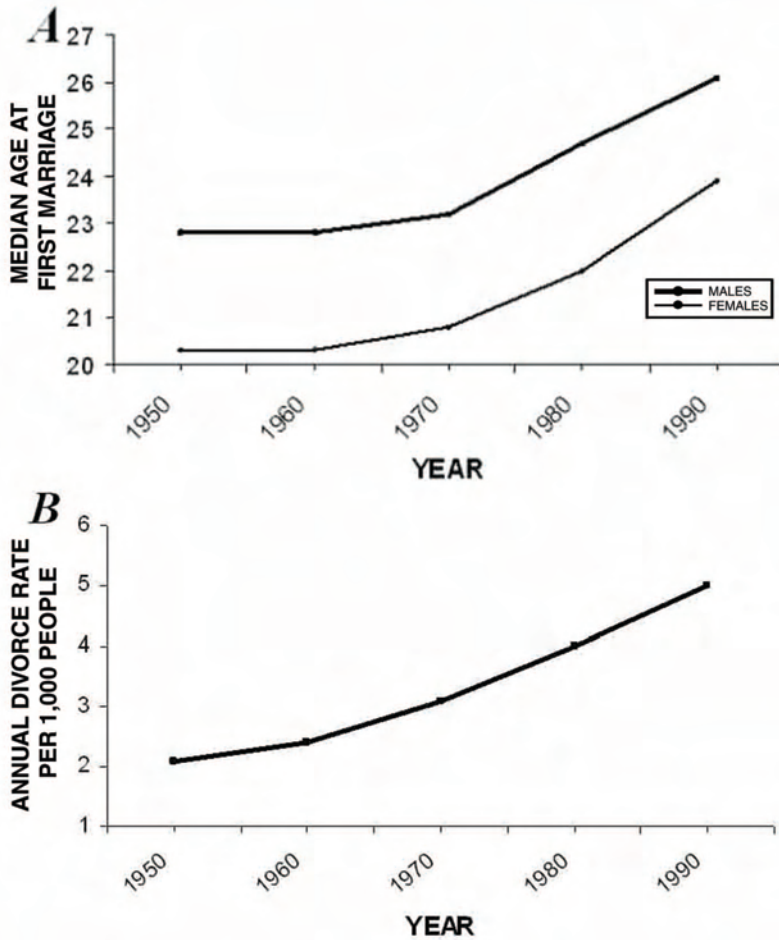


Figure 8.1. Age Versus Divorce Rate. If growing older helps people form stable relationships, then as the age of first marriage has increased over the past fifty years, we might expect the divorce rate to decrease, but the opposite has occurred. Source: U.S. Census Bureau data.

### Shouldn't We Let Them Try?

In addition, it turns out that *young males* have a relatively *low* divorce rate. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, among 580,000 divorces that took place in the United States in 1990, teenage males (nineteen and under) divorced at the rate of 32.8 per thousand couples, whereas males in their early twenties (twenty to twenty-four) had a much higher divorce rate: 50.2 per thousand couples. There was little difference in the divorce rate for females in these two age groups: about forty-eight per thousand couples.<sup>22</sup>

Fifty divorces per thousand couples is a high rate, for sure. If that rate were

maintained for ten years, simple multiplication (ten times fifty) suggests that half of the couples would then be divorced. (In fact, the way the math works out, the proportion is actually lower.) It's this kind of logic that leads us to discourage or prohibit young people from marrying.

But this logic is seriously flawed. For one thing, if fifty young couples out of a thousand get divorced in a given year, that means that 950 couples don't. And even if half of young couples get divorced over a ten-year period, *how would that justify prohibiting young people from marrying?* After all, about half of all *adult* marriages end in divorce eventually. Does that mean we should prohibit *all* people from marrying? *Does the possibility of failure mean that no one should be allowed to try?* Should the 40 or 50 percent of teen couples who are capable of creating relatively permanent marriages be prevented or discouraged from marrying just because other teens fail?

The divorce rate among young people is certainly higher than among older people, but the relatively high divorce rate among young people is not necessarily driven by youth per se or even by a lack of experience. The fact is that young couples are subjected disproportionately to two powerful sources of stress—economic hardship and children—either one of which is enough to destroy a marriage. Given these stressors, one might even marvel at the relatively high success rate teen marriages have.

People also argue against teen marriage because they say it interferes with education and economic advancement, but that argument mistakenly assumes that education *must* occur when we're young. We've come to believe this because we've all been raised in a society in which education is required until age sixteen or eighteen, in which young people are largely prohibited from working and in which many young people are taught that they *must* go to college immediately after high school. In fact, as many adults have discovered in recent decades, education can and probably should continue throughout one's life, and the education that has the greatest impact on us is the education we seek when we're truly ready.

## LOVE AND SEX INVOLVING MINORS

The more I've learned about the way our legal system deals with relationships between adults and minors, as well as between minors and other minors, the more concerned I've become. Remember the factual context, developed in this and previous chapters, in which I'm examining this issue: Teens, on average, are capable of exercising judgment every bit as sound as the judgment of adults. Many teens are capable of experiencing deep and mature feelings of love.

Many teens are capable of entering into successful, long-term relationships; they've done so throughout human history, and they still do so in countries around the world. When teens are given real responsibility and authority, they sometimes mature virtually overnight. Teens differ one from the other, just as adults do; some are more capable than others.

Given that as our foundation—and I believe these points are indisputable—here are three cases that are especially disturbing. Each case shows a legal system applying general principles of questionable validity to situations in which these principles don't apply. Each shows legal authorities doing irreparable harm to innocent families. Each shows justice acting mindlessly, based merely on people's ages rather than on their abilities or motives.

### **The Fonsecas**

December 2002. Judge Kevin J. McGee of Ventura County, California, stating that this was “the most unusual [case] one can imagine,” sentenced twenty-three-year-old Andrew Fonseca to a year in jail for having sex with a fourteen-year-old student. Fonseca had been a wrestling coach at the Moorpark High School when he became involved with the student. Subsequently, the two got married and moved in with her parents. In court, the young woman's mother begged the judge to be lenient: “Andrew is living at our house, married to our daughter, and he works and supports her. *It's been the best thing that ever happened to her.*” The judge ignored her pleas.<sup>23</sup>

The sentence also required Fonseca to register as a sex offender, a designation that will stay with him the rest of his life and that will prevent him from ever teaching or coaching again. During the sentencing, the father-in-law, seated in the back of the courtroom, was overheard uttering “a stream of profanities.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Fualaau and Letourneau**

In the summer of 1996, Mary Kay Letourneau, a thirty-four-year-old teacher and married mother of four children, began having an affair with Vili Fualaau, a twelve-year-old student at the school where she taught, the Shorewood Elementary School in Burien, Washington.

Although some news reports suggest otherwise, it appears that he was not actually her student when the affair began. That summer, they each took the same classes at the Highline Community College and at a Seattle art store, and it appears that that's when things began. Vili—whom Mary called “Buddha”—was also unusually advanced for a male his age; he had reached puberty at age ten and was several inches taller than his married lover.



In February 1997, Mary's husband discovered his wife's notes and journal entries about Vili and had her arrested. She gave birth to Vili's child, Audrey, on May 23, 1997.<sup>25</sup>

In August of that year, Letourneau pleaded guilty to two counts of statutory rape. She later received a suspended sentence but had to serve eighty additional days in jail. She was also required to enroll in a sex-offender treatment program and was forbidden from seeing Fualaau for the rest of her life—a common restriction when adults have had sex with a minor.

Early in 1998, after having been released from jail for good behavior, she was found in a car with Fualaau and arrested for violating the terms of her suspended sentence. The suspension was subsequently revoked, and the original sentence—eighty-nine months in prison—was reinstated. In prison it was soon discovered that Letourneau was now pregnant again, and in October 1998 she gave birth to Georgia, her second child with Fualaau. Both children were raised by Fualaau and his mother.

It was difficult to judge from news reports exactly what was going on here. Was Vili really a “child” who had been corrupted and “raped” by his teacher, or was there more to the story?

When I saw a television interview with Vili in February of 1999, it became clear that the legal system simply couldn't handle the truth of the matter. Here is what Vili said:

*Mary didn't take away my childhood. I gave it away by consent. I knew what I was getting into. I don't feel in one bit of my body that she ever raped me. I don't love her because she's thirty years old, and she doesn't love me because I'm fifteen years old. We love each other for who we are.*<sup>26</sup>

From the tone and cadence of his speech, it was clear that this was a mature young man, not a child. Throughout most of human history, Vili would have been recognized for what he was: a young man who was deeply in love with an older woman. But in the modern Western world, and especially in the United States, we arbitrarily dismiss *all* people under a certain age—eighteen, or twenty-one, or even twenty-six—as emotionally incompetent children, no matter what their actual capabilities.

Don't get me wrong. Fualaau and Letourneau shouldn't win any awards for their behavior. A teacher-student relationship is objectionable, at least when it's exploitative, and adultery and the destruction of an intact family can hardly be defended. Nor can ignoring a court order, even if one doesn't agree with it.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Twelve-Year-Old “Predators”

*In February 2002, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that people as young as twelve must be ordered to register as sexual predators for committing certain sexual crimes—a designation that will stay with them the rest of their lives. Thomas Kilbride, one of the dissenting justices, thought that this was unfair considering that, under Illinois law, a sixteen-year-old sex offender convicted of murder need not be labeled this way.<sup>27</sup>*

But Letourneau wasn't imprisoned because she slept with a former student or because she committed adultery. As a Boston judge told me years ago, “If we locked everyone up for committing adultery, there'd be no one left to turn the key.” Letourneau was condemned because she had had a serious relationship with someone society wrongly considers to be a helpless puppy. History, psychology, anthropology and Vili himself say otherwise.

In 2002, when Fualaau and his mother were having financial difficulties (among other things, Vili had just been fired from his job at a McDonald's), he and his mother filed a frivolous and ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit against the Des Moines (Washington) Police Department and the Highline School District, claiming that they hadn't done enough to prevent his relationship with Letourneau.<sup>28</sup>

In defending itself the Highline School District presented only one witness, Dr. Csaba Hegyvary, a psychiatrist with twenty-two years of experience who had evaluated both Fualaau and Letourneau. According to a local news report, Hegyvary told the jury that “although it was legally rape, Letourneau is not a rapist, Fualaau is not a victim, and the best outcome for everyone involved is for them to get married after Letourneau is released from prison.” This wasn't, he said, a case of sexual abuse; it was “a love story.”<sup>29</sup>

While in prison Mary Kay Letourneau was allowed almost no contact with any of her six children. She also spent time in solitary confinement, at least in part because of repeated attempts on her part to contact Vili.

After spending seven-and-a-half years in prison, Letourneau was released at age forty-two in August 2004, prohibited from seeing Vili for the rest of her life and required to register as a sex offender. Vili, then twenty-one, immediately asked the court to remove the contact restriction on the grounds that, as an adult, he should be able to “pick his friends.” The restriction was removed (but not the sex offender designation), and the two subsequently married and appear to be doing well.<sup>30</sup>

## Healy and Kowalski

As you read about this next case, keep in mind where this chapter started—with the story of a prolific, highly honored, happily married couple—Mary and Paul Onesi—who married when she was thirteen and he was twenty-one.

Heather Kowalski, thirteen, and Dylan Healy, twenty-one, met over the Internet. That was their fatal mistake, or at least Dylan's. After all, everyone knows that the Internet is where perverts lurk and “children” are corrupted. Of course, the Internet also happens to be where millions of adults, both mature and immature, now go to find dates and spouses.

When Heather's parents found out about the relationship, about where it started and about Dylan's age, they forbade Heather from seeing him, or at least her mom did (see below). Heather, after all, wasn't even allowed to date, and here she was carousing with a “man.” Heather ignored them and continued to contact and see Dylan frequently. Eventually the parents got a restraining order against Dylan, but by that time Dylan and Heather were madly in love with each other.

On March 25, 1997, Heather ran away with her lover, and they drove around New England for about three weeks until authorities picked them up. A massive hunt for the young couple had been set in motion by media appearances by her frantic parents, including a poignant call for help on *The Maury Povich Show*. Povich's hyperbolic theme was “Families Who've Been Torn Apart by the Internet,” and he referred to Heather repeatedly as a “child” who had been “manipulated and lured away from home” by a “predator.”<sup>31</sup>

Journalist Judith Levine reports on her investigation of this case in her book *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. Her take, which I find to be persuasive, is that Dylan and Heather were each at about the same maturity level, mainly because Dylan was fairly immature for his age, whereas Heather, like many young women, was somewhat advanced. There is no evidence that Dylan was a pedophile or predator, in spite of sensational news reports. As we saw in the Letourneau case, there is also no question that Heather was a willing participant in what occurred and that the two were happy together the entire time they dated. No evidence was ever presented suggesting any sort of coercion on Dylan's part. The coercion was entirely on the part of the parents, which is why Heather chose to run away with her attentive lover.<sup>32</sup>

In a letter Heather sent to Dylan after he was arrested, she wrote, “I think that the best time I ever had being with you was when we were gone, I would

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Love in Czechoslovakia

*After James Kirchner, a Detroit teacher, saw me talking about teens on a TV program, he sent me some illuminating emails about teen love in Czechoslovakia, where he had taught in the 1990s. Here is an excerpt: “Czechs did not consider teenagers to be children, and they did not believe that marrying in one’s teens necessarily turned out badly.... When the girls in my Czech high school were fifteen or sixteen, if they had boyfriends, the boyfriend was often in his mid- to late twenties. I asked them why they didn’t go out with guys their own age, and the response was, ‘Guys our age only think about beer and getting into our pants. The older guys have something to talk about.’ I asked them if their mothers knew about the relationships, and the girls replied that their mothers were fine with the whole thing.... The idea was evidently that a man that age has the maturity to keep her out of trouble and that if they became sexually active and conceived a child, he could handle his responsibilities, which a sixteen-year-old boy [sic] cannot.”*

watch you sleep and think about the wonderful life we would someday have.... I love you.”<sup>33</sup>

Before I tell you the very sad ending to this story, let’s try to put the relationship in a historical context. In other eras—through most of human history, in fact—Heather would have been considered to be a young woman, not a child, just as Mary Onesi was considered to be a young woman when she married her husband of eighty years. That doesn’t mean Heather’s parents would have approved of Dylan as a mate for her; he was unemployed, for one thing, and living off a trust fund that had been established by his late father. They might not have liked him for any number of reasons. But given that he truly loved their daughter, they might have at least given him a chance to court her. It’s certainly unlikely that they would have dismissed the relationship out of hand simply because of Heather’s age—or Dylan’s.

Even in the modern United States, if Dylan and Heather had met at a party or in a park, it’s unlikely that he would have been punished as severely as he was. Fonseca was sentenced to a year in jail for having had sex with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend, and Letourneau was hit with the maximum possible sentence the law allowed in her sensational case: seven-and-half years.

But in the fall of 1997, Dylan Healy was sentenced to *twelve to twenty-four years in prison* for multiple counts of “felonious sexual assault with a minor,” as well as

crossing state lines to have sex with a minor. That's twelve to twenty-four years in prison for engaging in a mutually-satisfying relationship in which no coercion was ever shown and no emotional or physical harm was ever demonstrated.<sup>34</sup>

This draconian sentence was driven by our very mistaken notions about the capabilities of young people, further inflamed by our current fears of Internet predation. On the Povich show, Robert Kowalski said of his daughter, "She's still a little girl. She needs to be taken care of like a little girl."<sup>35</sup> The facts of the case shout otherwise, and he and his wife also failed to note that at the time of Heather's disappearance, their own marriage was near its end. They had filed for divorce the previous year, and they were living apart. Even more disturbing, Pauline Kowalski's court filings claimed that her husband had *encouraged* the relationship between Heather and Dylan.<sup>36</sup>

The stress of Dylan's conviction helped destroy his own mother's marriage of ten years. After his sentencing, he read a long statement in which he professed his love for Heather, a young woman who "made me feel happier than I had ever felt [and] who brought joy into my life.... I loved her beyond reason and fled with the one I loved."<sup>37</sup>

## LOVE LAWS

I wish I could say that they exist—love laws, that is—if only so we could examine them. As far as I can determine, however, there aren't any. In other words, there's nothing illegal about a thirteen year old dating or having a love relationship with a forty year old. They can go to movies together, send letters and poetry to each other and profess their love. But they can't have sex, and they can't marry in most states, even with the consent of the minor's parents.

So the laws that govern the love lives of teens are all about sex and marriage, not about love. Perhaps that's because we assume, as a culture, that romantic feelings can't be controlled, and, of course, we also assume, mistakenly, that the romantic feelings of teens aren't real.

### Laws Restricting Sex and Marriage

The laws that govern sex and marriage among teens are highly restrictive in some ways and surprisingly lax in others, not to mention confusing and inconsistent. In California, for example—a progressive and innovative state when it comes to legal matters—it's okay, under mandatory reporting laws (laws requiring physicians and other professionals to report a crime), for two thirteen-year-olds to have sex with each other. It's also okay for two fourteen-year-olds to have sex with each other,

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Dissent About Consent

*Worldwide, there is enormous disagreement about when a young person should have the right to consent to sex, and there is no obvious pattern by religion or region. In some poor third-world countries the age of consent is quite low—twelve in Mexico and fourteen in Chile—but in Swaziland one must be eighteen to have sex and in Tunisia one must be twenty. There is even variation in Arab countries. In Syria a young woman can consent to sex at age thirteen, in Egypt and Uganda the minimum age for both sexes is eighteen, and in Saudi Arabia no one is allowed to have sex outside of marriage, period (although it is okay, and even encouraged, for girls as young as ten to marry much older men). In industrialized nations, the typical age of consent is sixteen, but in Japan, the second richest nation in the world, it's only thirteen.<sup>38</sup>*

but not for a fourteen-year-old to have sex with a thirteen-year-old.

It's also permissible for two seventeen-year-olds to have sex with each other and for two eighteen-year-olds to have sex with each other, but it's *strictly illegal* for anyone eighteen or older to have sex with *anyone* under eighteen, even if that person consents to engaging in the sexual act, even with parental consent. Unlike most other states, California doesn't have an "age of consent"—an age under eighteen at which a minor can consent to having sex.<sup>39</sup>

Please consider: Is a sixteen-year-old allowed to have sex with a fourteen-year-old in California? Are two fifteen-year-olds allowed to have sex? Are two eleven-year-olds allowed to have sex? Is a sixty-year-old allowed to have sex with an eighteen-year-old?

The answer to all of these questions is yes. But an eighteen-year-old is not allowed have sex with a seventeen-year-old, even if the two are exercising good judgment, and even if parents of the seventeen-year-old approve.

In Colorado, where young people under age eighteen can consent to having sex with adults, it's okay for two eleven-year-olds to have sex, and it's even okay for a fifteen-year-old to have sex with a twenty-four-year-old. But if a seventeen-year-old has sex with a thirteen-year-old, he or she is guilty of committing a Class 4 Felony.<sup>40</sup>

The marriage laws are equally quirky, especially when you compare the laws of different states. Without parental consent, all fifty states except Mississippi and Nebraska require both parties to be eighteen or over in order to marry. In Nebraska the minimum age is nineteen, and in Mississippi the minimum age is seventeen for males and fifteen for females. With parental consent, the land-

scape is quite varied. In California and Mississippi, for example, young people can marry *at any age* with the consent of parents. In Kansas and Massachusetts, females can marry at twelve with parental consent, and males can marry at fourteen. But in Delaware, Ohio and Rhode Island—except in cases of pregnancy or when judges intervene—females can't marry until they're sixteen, and males can't marry until they're eighteen, even with the parents' blessing.<sup>41</sup>

These laws sometimes give rise to absurd situations. In 1997, for example, in California's Santa Clara County, twenty-two-year-old Juan Jiminez was charged with the statutory rape of his seventeen-year-old wife, Delia Lopez, after a medical doctor reported them to authorities for having had consensual sex before they were married. They were happily and legally married, living with Ms. Lopez's parents at the time of the arrest. The parents approved of and had granted permission for the marriage, and Delia and Juan were the proud parents of a baby boy. There was nothing coercive or even strange about this situation; the two were simply pursuing a loving relationship with each other. What's odd here is the law. If Delia and Juan had both been seventeen, they could have had sex with each other without penalty and then could have married with parental consent. But because Juan was considered an adult, they weren't allowed to have sex before marriage, even with parental consent.<sup>42</sup>

### Faulty Assumptions

The many laws that restrict the love and sex lives of teens, their inconsistencies and absurdities aside, are based on no fewer than eight faulty assumptions:

**Love.** Implicit in these laws is the assumption that *all* young people are incapable of experiencing the same kinds of loving feelings that adults do. As we've seen, that simply isn't true.

**Sex.** These laws assume that *no* young people are capable of engaging in sexual activities responsibly. Again, this is false. Teens and adults who took the EDTA had similar scores on the scale that looked at sex, suggesting that, on the average, basic knowledge about sex is the same for adults and teens. More important, teens would be more likely to engage in sex responsibly if they weren't in adversarial relationships with adults.

**Homogeneity.** The laws assume that all young people are the same—and, in effect, that all adults are too. But teens vary enormously in their abilities, just as adults do. To say that *all* teens should be restricted because *some* are incompetent makes no sense. Imagine if we used that logic for drivers licenses: there are incompetent drivers of every age (and race and gender); should we therefore allow *no one* to drive?

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### A Court and Legislature Back Down

*In 2005, seventeen-year-old Genarlow Wilson—a high-school honors student and football star—received a mandatory ten-year prison sentence for having had oral sex with a fifteen-year-old female; if they had had intercourse rather than oral sex, the maximum sentence would have been one year. In 2007, the Georgia Supreme Court set Wilson free, finding that the sentence had been extreme. The Georgia state legislature has now rewritten the law so that oral sex among minors is a misdemeanor—still punishable by up to a year in prison, however. Other states, such as Indiana, Connecticut and California, have also recently reformed their laws to reduce the penalties paid by minors for engaging in some forms of sexual behavior.<sup>43</sup>*

**Judgment.** The laws suggest that no young person is capable of making sensible decisions about matters of sex, love or romance. Again, this simply isn't so.

**Relationships.** These laws suggest that no young person is capable of entering into a stable, successful relationship. As history and other cultures teach us, this is false.

**Magic.** These laws assume that magic happens when people turn eighteen (or twelve or fourteen or sixteen or whatever other arbitrary age is specified)—in other words, that capabilities change in a quantum fashion when the age boundary is crossed. But human development is actually gradual and continuous, and dramatic change certainly doesn't occur instantly on a birthday.

**Coercion.** These laws imply that the person who is over the age boundary is necessarily coercing the person who is underage. But, as we've seen, in many cases there is no coercion, and it is possible in some cases that coercion or manipulation flows the other way.

**Harm.** Finally, these laws suggest that some or many or perhaps even *all* young people who have sex or marry young will necessarily be harmed in some way. But we've already seen that it's possible for very young spouses to form successful long-term relationships, and research reviewed by Judith Levine in *Harmful to Minors* suggests that forcing sex to occur in an atmosphere of ignorance and secrecy does far more harm than allowing it to occur in an atmosphere of knowledge and acceptance.

Young people can indeed love, and they appear to be able to do so in all the beautiful and crazy ways that adults do. There is no evidence that teen love



differs in some fundamental way from adult love. Teens also are capable of entering into stable, long-term relationships. The array of laws that limit teen romance and sexuality are absurd and arbitrary, and they sometimes destroy legitimate relationships and cause innocent people and their families great harm.

**Q:** *Do you mean to imply that it's okay for my thirteen-year-old little girl to have sex—and perhaps even to have sex with a twenty-five-year-old man?*

**A:** Given the mindset that is prevalent in modern America, it's almost impossible for me to give a reasonable answer to this question without sounding insensitive or insane. But the fact is that some, and perhaps even many, thirteen-year-olds are ready for sex, and even for deep love and marriage. Remember that throughout most of human history, our ancestors began having children shortly after puberty. Our brains and bodies are designed that way.

Is your daughter ready to take on this kind of responsibility? I have no idea, but would you be willing to find out? As for that twenty-five-year-old man, if he truly loved and respected your daughter, and if he wanted to marry her and support her and treat her with kindness for the rest of his life, and if your daughter also loved this man deeply, would you object to their union?

As I indicated in this chapter, one of the most successful marriages ever documented in America—a happy marriage for more than eighty years—was between Mary Corsaro and Paul Onesi, who married in 1917 when she was thirteen and he was twenty-one. They were honored on World Marriage Day in 1995 as the longest-married couple in the country.

It's common in other cultures for people of widely different ages to marry; only in America do we think that spouses need to be same age, even though research suggests that age difference is a poor predictor of success in a marriage. It's the *person* you marry that counts, not his or her age.

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