

MODERN LOVE: THE FINDINGS OF A SORORITY CHAPLAIN

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DIVINE PROVIDENCE HAS SELECTED ME TO be part of a perverse social experiment. I am going to graduate school to become a minister and my girlfriend is in a sorority. Ergo, I am the Phi Sigma Sigma chaplain. My list of duties includes: relationship counselor, ethicist, confessor, and linguist. Like many people in this age of technology, I too have had to update my skills to stay on top of my chaplain duties. Love letters have gone the way of the buffalo to be replaced by Facebook pokes. Antique nomenclature like “going steady” went to “seeing each other,” and is now known as “talking to each other.” Many things have changed and I find myself grappling to stay hip.

I have not shied away from my position, but I will admit that at times I am horribly ill-prepared for it. My religious vocation somehow draws the sorority sisters to me, as if I know all of the timeless answers to life’s greatest questions. They don’t realize that I helplessly watch them to learn what the newest “cool” is. I go to a small seminary, where the girls seem more like sisters than objects of lust. My girlfriend and the sorority are at a large university where everyone is perpetually courting each other. When I visit the sorority house, I feel like a student naively trying to learn how a modern lover should act in an age where chocolate is not something you buy a girl, but rather a phone that you call her on. I have found that there is no time to ask why, but to simply accept the standards of modern chivalry at face value. Why is it attractive for a guy in Michigan to wear Puca beads in January? Although I don’t personally know, I have confidence that people at MTV do know.

As relationship counselor, I have had to learn the rapidity of the modern relationship. Gone are the days of relationships that progressed only during normal business hours. In the dark ages, a week-long relationship was measured by seven days. That same relationship is now measured

by 168 hours (10,080 minutes for the more passionate lovers). If the average college student can send 1.5 text messages in a minute...well, you get the picture. Fraternity fops can text message at any hour of the day without waking their girlfriend's surly roommate. Likewise, a young damsel in distress can check the relationship status of anyone online and view incriminating photos all while she is busy "washing her hair." As a result of this compressed day, I have had to update my relationship time scale. The day is the new week and the month is the new year. This knowledge has kept me from embarrassing situations like assuming love is hard to know before a month. The sisters seem pleased that I am now becoming a man of mode.

Ethics in this modern age of love are an entirely different beast. Gender ethics have been adjusted in recent years to accommodate new fashions. Push-up bras are not a form of deception, but rather a strategic emphasis of one's aesthetic blessings. Pseudo Eskimo boots are seen as multicultural. Claiming that your fake Coach purse is actually genuine is a damnable offense. A don't-ask-don't-tell approach is the most ethical option in this situation. A male frequenting a tanning salon is permissible, but only under the auspices of obtaining a good base tan for spring break. A male born in 1985 wearing an Abercrombie "1979 Surf Team" shirt is not forgery; it is the mark of urbanity. Lifting weights just before a party to have swelled biceps is vain. Lifting weights a week before a party is seen as taking a healthy interest in one's appearance.

I have noticed a change in legal ethics as well. Making out does not require a follow-up phone call, but anything beyond that does. Of course, this binding agreement is void if the inebriation clause was enacted. If a couple is "on a break," anything goes but it should be known that they will get back together—so leave your heart at the door. Two heterosexual males excessively interested in each other are defined as having a 'man-crush' or partaking in a "bromance." Reestablishing interest in the female gender can annul these classifications.

As sorority confessor, I hold a peculiar position. Pressure is on me to listen objectively and to judge—but not too much. The storyline is identical; the people are interchangeable. It goes like this: enter crying girl with her entourage. She spills her guts to everyone in the room about the boy that just broke up with her.

She says, "I loved him. I thought for sure he was the one."

I nod, giving my best shrink imitation. I sit back and listen, never offering counsel until asked (this is Female Psyche 101, so I have been told). Finally, with all of her grievances laid out like a menagerie of emotions, all eyes turn to the chaplain and only male opinion in the house.

"How long were you two together?" This is my favorite go-to question.

Answers typically range anywhere from two weeks to a month. At about this time in the conversation, the proverbial three hundred pound elephant enters the room and sits down next

to the crying girl. When said aloud, the words love and two weeks together in the same sentence sound absurd. It's not that I am some love-snob claiming to know the exact moment love can exist. I have fallen prey to the trickery of modern love more than I am willing to admit. At the press of a button, modern lovers can know what their crushes are doing, what their astrological signs are, and who their new friends are. The envious lover can even have ocular proof of what his mistress wore last night to the bar. This incessant flow of information tricks one into thinking that accessibility is equal to love.

Don't lose hope; this age of feverish communication is not without a notion of divine right and wrong. If one is "in a relationship" on Facebook and anything romantic happens, then contrition is needed. Likewise, if a person's status is "single," it can be assumed that all emotional ties have been cut and forward progress is permissible. Unlike most things in this age of relativity, Facebook relationship status can be taken as Gospel. Beyond the confines of the Internet, other matters of absolute truth exist. Infidelity is frowned upon and monogamy, no matter how hasty, is the preferred venue to pursue romantic matters. The lofty aim of 2.1 kids and a white picket fence is alive and well in most university students. The need for an honorary sorority chaplain is still present, so I suppose that says something of modern love's religious needs as well.

The modern romance has turned linguistics into a full-time enterprise. With an increased reliance on electronic communications, lovers have been forced to more accurately convey their thoughts. Take the statement: "I had fun last night." When spoken, the phrase could be flirtatious, gregarious, resentful, jealous, sincere, or any other slew of adjectives. During the pre-modern romance, listeners could piece together intonation, body language, and facial expression and get a pretty accurate sense of what the statement meant. However, in the modern romance, one is sadly left with only font to decipher the true meaning of the statement. Is Arial flirtier than Times New Roman? Does her use of Wingdings mean she's easy or just being polite? Does her size 8 font mean she thinks she is fat? These subtle cues leave swooning lovers wanting. Binary conveys data well, but it falters on concepts like love.

The love of the twenty-first century is not too different from its predecessors. Modern love still holds onto the romantic notion that a person can and will find his or her perfect compliment in another person. The major differences in modern love: sterilization and haste. Modern lovers want to love without getting their hands dirty. Seeing heartbreak on your sweetheart's face is an ugly thing. An electronic screen serves as a buffer between the heartbreaker and the broken-hearted. For better or worse, raccoon eyes cannot be seen in tearful instant message breakups. On the bright side, modern love looks better than love ever has. Sadly, the veneer of hiding behind computer screens may be its demise.

As their chaplain, the girls ask me what the Bible says about love and they are somewhat saddened by what I divulge. I try to tell them that Biblical love is gritty, resolute, and self-sacrificing—not very glamorous by trendy standards. I am waiting until ugly love comes back in style.