

CHAPTER 1

SEARCHING FOR YOUR SOUL MATE

Many of the frustrations experienced by today's singles seem like problems unique to our time and technological setting: not hearing back on a text. Agonizing over what really is your *favorite* movie for your online dating profile. Wondering whether you should teleport over some roses to that girl you had dinner with last night. (REALLY SKEPTICAL THAT THEY WILL FIGURE OUT TELEPORTATION BY BOOK RELEASE IN JUNE 2015 AS I WAS TOLD BY MY SCIENCE ADVISERS. EDITOR, PLEASE REMOVE IF TELEPORTATION KINKS HAVEN'T BEEN WORKED OUT.)

These kinds of quirks are definitely new to the romantic world, but as I investigated and interviewed for this book, I found that the changes in romance and love are much deeper and bigger in scale than I realized.

Right now I'm one of millions of young people who are in a similar place. We are meeting people, dating, getting into and out of relationships, all with the hope of finding someone we truly love and with whom we share a deep connection. We may even want to get married and start a family too.

This journey seems fairly standard now, but it's wildly different from what people did even just decades ago. To be specific, I now see that our ideas about two things—"searching" and "the right person"—are completely different from what they used to be. Which means our expectations about how courtship works are too.

DOUGHNUTS FOR INTERVIEWS:

A VISIT TO A NEW YORK RETIREMENT COMMUNITY

If I wanted to see how things have changed over time, I figured that I should start by learning about the experiences of the older generations still around today. And that meant talking to some old folks.

To be honest, I tend to romanticize the past, and though I appreciate all the conveniences of modern life, sometimes I yearn for simpler times. Wouldn't it be cool to be single in a bygone era? I take a girl to a drive-in movie, we go have a cheeseburger and a malt at the diner, and then we make out under the stars in my old-timey convertible. Granted, this might have been tough in the fifties given my brown skin tone and racial tensions at the time, but in my fantasy, racial harmony is also part of the deal.

So, to learn about romance in this era, Eric and I went down

to a retirement community on the Lower East Side of New York City to interview some seniors.

We came armed with a big box of Dunkin' Donuts and some coffee, tools that the staff had said would be key to convincing the old folks to speak with us. Sure enough, when the seniors caught a whiff of doughnuts, they were quick to pull up chairs and start answering our questions.

One eighty-eight-year-old man named Alfredo took to the doughnuts very quickly. About ten minutes into the discussion, to which he'd contributed nothing but his age and name, he looked at me with a confused expression, threw up his doughnut-covered hands, and left.

When we came back a few days later to do more interviews, Alfredo was back. The staff explained that Alfredo had misunderstood the purpose of the previous meeting—he thought we wanted to talk to him about his time in the war—but he was now fully prepared to answer questions about his own experiences in love and marriage. Once again, he was pretty quick to take down a doughnut, and then, faster than you could wipe the last few crumbs of a French cruller off your upper lip, Alfredo was gone-zo.

I can only hope that a similarly easy way to scheme free doughnuts presents itself to me when I go into retirement.

Thankfully, others were more informative. Victoria, age sixty-eight, grew up in New York City. She got married when she was twenty-one—to a man who lived in the same apartment complex, one floor above her.

“I was standing in front of my building with some friends and he approached me,” Victoria said. “He told me he liked me very much and asked if I'd like to go out with him. I didn't say anything. He asked me two or three more times before I agreed to go out with him.”

It was Victoria's first date. They went to a movie and had dinner at her mom's house afterward. He soon became her boyfriend and, after a year of dating, her husband.

They've been married for forty-eight years.

When Victoria first told me her story, it had aspects I expected to be common among the group—she married very young, her parents met her boyfriend almost immediately, and they shifted into marriage fairly quickly.

I figured that the part about marrying someone who lived in her same building was kind of random.

But then the next woman we spoke with, Sandra, seventy-eight, said she got married to a guy who lived just across the street.

Stevie, sixty-nine, married a woman who lived down the hall.

Jose, seventy-five, married a woman who lived one street over.

Alfredo married someone from across the street (probably the daughter of the neighborhood doughnut shop owner).

It was remarkable. In total, fourteen of the thirty-six seniors I spoke with had ended up marrying someone who lived within walking distance of their childhood home. People were marrying neighbors who lived on the same street, in the same neighborhood, and even in the same building. It seemed a bit bizarre.

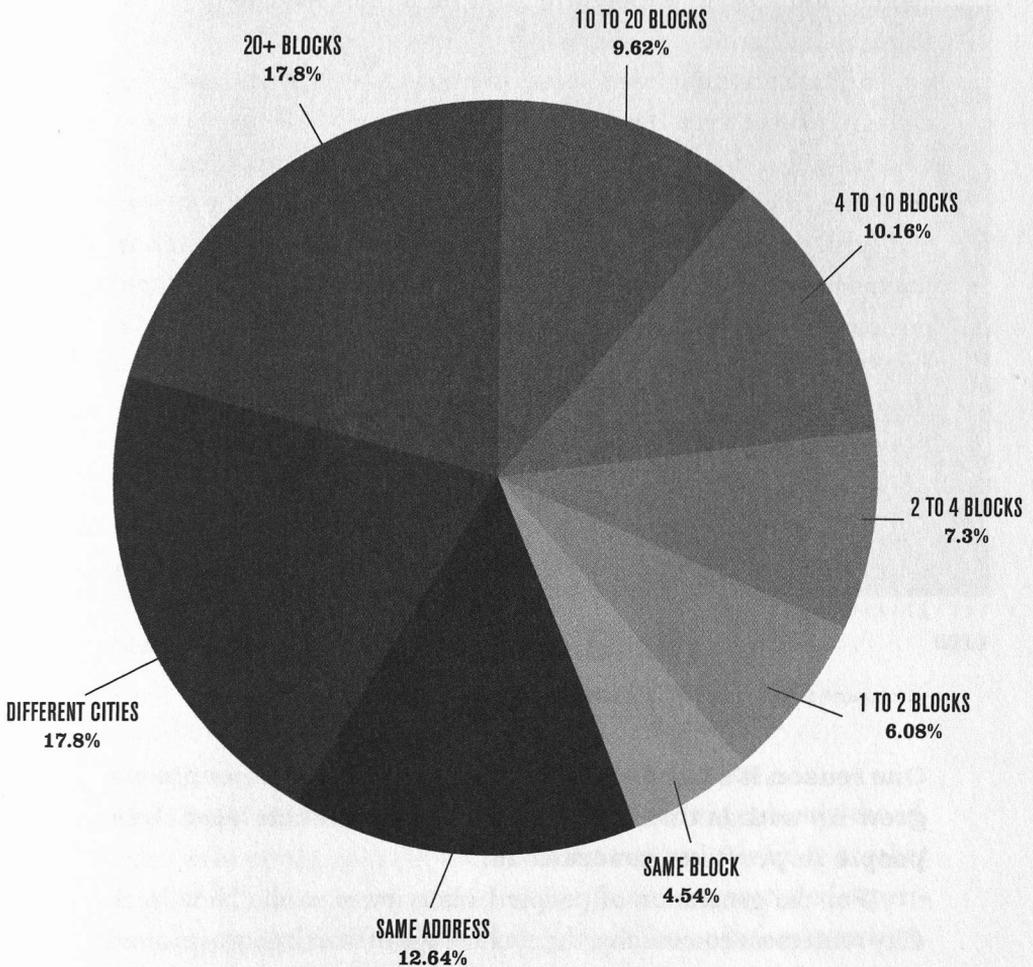
“Guys,” I said. “You’re in New York City. Did you ever think, *Oh, maybe there’s some people outside of my building?* Why limit yourself so much? Why not expand your horizons?”

They just shrugged and said that it wasn’t what was done.

After our interviews we examined whether this spoke to a larger trend. In 1932 a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania named James Bossard looked through five thousand consecutive marriage licenses on file for people who lived in the city of Philadelphia. Whoa: *One-third* of the couples who got married had lived within a five-block radius of each other before they got married. One out of six had lived within the same block. Most amazingly, one of every eight married couples had lived in the *same building* before they got married.¹

Maybe this trend of marrying locally held in big cities but not elsewhere? Well, a lot of sociologists in the 1930s and 1940s were

**GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY OF PARTNERS IN 5,000
MARRIAGES, PHILADELPHIA, 1932**



wondering that same thing, and they reported their findings in the leading social science journals of the time. Yep, their findings were remarkably similar to Bossard's in Philadelphia, with a few variations.

For instance, people in smaller towns also married neighbors when they were available. But when they weren't, because

the pool was too small, people expanded their horizons—but only as far as was necessary. As the Yale sociologist John Ellsworth Jr. said after a study of marriage patterns in Simsbury, Connecticut (population 3,941): “People will go as far as they have to to find a mate, but no farther.”²

Things are obviously very different today. I found out sociologists don’t even do these sorts of studies on the geography of marriage at the city level anymore. Personally, I can’t think of even one friend who married someone from their neighborhood, and hardly anyone who married a person from their home city. For the most part my friends married people they’d met during their postcollege years, when they were exposed to folks from all over the country and in some cases all over the world.

Think about where you grew up as a kid, your apartment building or your neighborhood. Could you imagine being married to one of those clowns?

EMERGING ADULTHOOD:

WHEN GROWN-UPS GROW UP

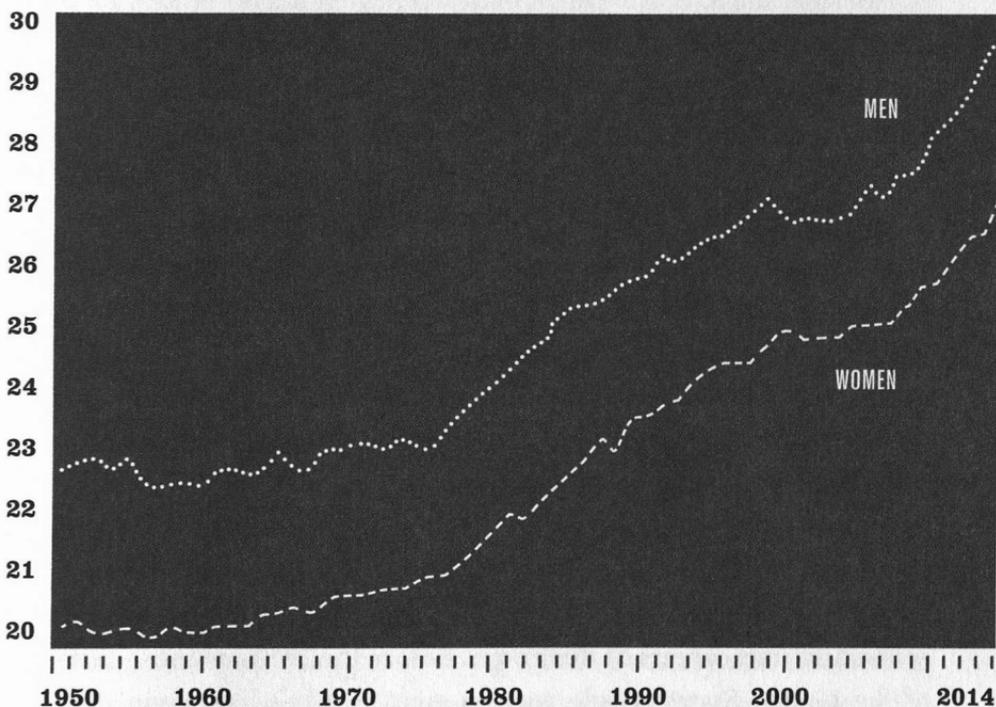
One reason it’s so hard to imagine marrying the people we grew up with is that these days we marry much later than people in previous generations.

For the generation of people I interviewed in the New York City retirement community, the average age of marriage was around twenty for women and twenty-three for men.

Today the average age of first marriage is about twenty-seven for women and twenty-nine for men, and it’s around thirty for both men and women in big cities like New York and Philadelphia.

Why has this age of first marriage increased so dramatically in the past few decades? For the young people who got married in the 1950s, getting married was the first step in adulthood. After high school or college, you got married and you left the house. For to-

**AVERAGE AGE OF FIRST MARRIAGE
IN THE UNITED STATES**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, and Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2014.

day's folks, marriage is usually one of the later stages in adulthood. Now most young people spend their twenties and thirties in another stage of life, where they go to university, start a career, and experience being an adult outside of their parents' home before marriage.

This period isn't all about finding a mate and getting married. You have other priorities as well: getting educated, trying out different jobs, having a few relationships, and, with luck, becoming a more fully developed person. Sociologists even have a name for this new stage of life: emerging adulthood.

During this stage we also wind up greatly expanding our pool of romantic options. Instead of staying in the neighborhood or our building, we move to new cities, spend years meeting people in

college and workplaces, and—in the biggest game changer—have the infinite possibilities provided by online dating and other similar technologies.

Besides the effects it has on marriage, emerging adulthood also offers young people an exciting, fun period of independence from their parents when they get to enjoy the pleasures of adulthood—before becoming husbands and wives and starting a family.

If you're like me, you couldn't imagine getting married without going through all this. When I was twenty-three, I knew nothing about what I was going to be as an adult. I was a business and biology major at NYU. Would I have married some girl who lived a few blocks from me in Bennettsville, South Carolina, where I grew up? What was this mysterious "biology business" I planned on setting up, anyway? I have no clue. I was an idiot who definitely wasn't ready for such huge life decisions.*

The seniors we spoke with simply did not have such a life stage, and many seemed to regret the lack of it. This was especially true for the women, who didn't have much chance to pursue higher education and start careers of their own. Before the 1960s, in most parts of the United States, single women simply didn't live alone, and many families frowned upon their daughters moving into shared housing for "working girls." Until they got married, these women were pretty much stuck at home under fairly strict adult supervision and lacked basic adult autonomy. They always had to let their parents know their whereabouts and plans. Even dating had heavy parental involvement: The parents would either have to approve the boy or accompany them on the date.

At one point during a focus group with older women, I asked them straight out whether a lot of women their age got married just to get out of the house. Every single woman there nodded. For women in this era, it seemed that marriage was the easiest way of acquiring the basic freedoms of adulthood.

Things weren't a breeze after that, though. Marriage, most

* My Bubba Sparxxx tattoo is a constant reminder.

women quickly discovered, liberated them from their parents but made them dependent on a man who might or might not treat them well and then saddled them with the responsibilities of homemaking and child rearing. It gave women of this era what was described at the time by Betty Friedan in her best-selling book *The Feminine Mystique* as “the problem that has no name.”*

Once women gained access to the labor market and won the right to divorce, the divorce rate skyrocketed. Some of the older women I met in our focus groups had left their husbands during the height of the divorce revolution, and they told me that they’d always resented missing out on something singular and special: the experience of being a young, unencumbered, single woman.

They wanted emerging adulthood.

“I think I missed a stage in my life, the stage where you go out with friends,” a woman named Amelia wistfully told us. “I was never allowed to go out with friends. My father wouldn’t allow it. He was that strict. So I tell my granddaughters, ‘Enjoy yourself. Enjoy yourself. Then get married.’” Hopefully this doesn’t lead to Amelia’s granddaughters doing a ton of ecstasy and then telling their mom, “Grandma told me to enjoy myself! Leave me alone!”

This sentiment was widely shared. Everyone, including the women who said they were happily married, said they wanted their daughters and granddaughters to approach marriage differently from how they had. They wanted the young women they knew to date a lot of men and experience different relationships before they took a husband. “My daughter, I told her go out, get an education, get a car, enjoy yourself,” said Amelia. “Then, at the end, choose someone.”

Even Victoria, who had been married for forty-eight years to the man who grew up in the apartment above her, agreed. She emphasized that she loved her husband dearly but hinted that, given another chance, she might have done something else.

“My husband and I, we understand each other,” she said. “But

* In her first draft Friedan named the problem Hampton, but her editors told her it wasn’t catchy enough.

we're very different. Sometimes I wonder, if I had married someone who had the same interests as me . . ." She trailed off.

Maybe she was interested in doughnuts and was thinking about a life with Alfredo?

THE LUXURY OF HAPPINESS:

FROM COMPANIONATE TO SOUL MATE MARRIAGE

The shift in when we look for love and marriage has been accompanied by a change in what we look for in a marriage partner. When the older folks I interviewed described the reasons that they dated, got engaged to, and then married their eventual spouses, they'd say things like "He seemed like a pretty good guy," "She was a nice girl," "He had a good job," and "She had access to doughnuts and I like doughnuts."

When you ask people today why they married someone, the answers are much more dramatic and loving. You hear things along the lines of "She is my other half," "I can't imagine experiencing the joys of life without him by my side," or "Every time I touch her hair, I get a huge boner."

On our subreddit we asked people: If you've been married or in a long-term relationship, how did you decide that the person was (or still is) the right person for you? What made this person different from others? The responses were strikingly unlike the ones we got from the older people we met at the senior center.

Many were filled with stories that illustrated a very deep connection between the two people that made them feel like they'd found someone unique, not just someone who was pleasant to start a family with.

One woman wrote:

* Yep. Alfredo.

The first moment I truly remember falling in love with my boyfriend was when I was singing Whitney Houston's "Greatest Love of All" under my breath to myself while we were studying near each other and then he started singing it at the top of his lungs. And we sang the whole song just laughing and dancing around the room. Moments like those where I feel so free and goofy and loved make me know he is the right person. Also I feel like since we've been together, I have become the best version of myself. I push myself to try different things and keep learning even though I'm out of school. It's so much for myself but having his support in my corner has made all the difference.

Another woman wrote:

He makes me laugh, and if I don't feel like laughing, he stops and takes the time to find out why. He makes me feel beautiful and loved in my most ugly and unlovable moments. We also share the same faith, morals, work ethic, love of movies and music, and the desire to travel.

And one said:

He's different from everyone because: He's a one-of-a-kind human being. There is no one in this world like him. He is stunning, and I am amazed by him every single day. He's made me a better person for having known and loved him. 5 years going strong and I'm still obsessed with him. He is my best friend.

All of these people had found someone truly special. From the way they described things, it seemed like their bar for committing to someone was much higher than it had been for the older folks who settled down just a few generations ago.

To figure out why people today use such exalted terms when they explain why they committed to their romantic partner, I spoke with Andrew Cherlin, the eminent sociologist of the family and au-

thor of the book *The Marriage-Go-Round*. Up until about fifty years ago, Cherlin said, most people were satisfied with what he calls a “companionate marriage.” In this type of marriage each partner had clearly defined roles. A man was the head of his household and the chief breadwinner, while a woman stayed home, took care of the house, and had kids. Most of the satisfaction you gained in the marriage depended on how well you fulfilled this assigned role. As a man, if you brought home the bacon, you could feel like you were a good husband. As a woman, if you kept a clean house and popped out 2.5 kids, you were a good wife. You loved your spouse, maybe, but not in an “every time I see his mustache, my heart flutters like a butterfly” type of way.

You didn’t marry each other because you were madly in love; you married because you could make a family together. While some people said they were getting married for love, the pressure to get married and start a family was such that not every match could be a love match, so instead we had the “good enough marriage.”

Waiting for true love was a luxury that many, especially women, could not afford. In the early 1960s, a full 76 percent of women admitted they would be willing to marry someone they didn’t love. However, only 35 percent of the men said they would do the same.³

If you were a woman, you had far less time to find a man. True love? This guy has a job *and* a decent mustache. Lock it down, girl.

This gets into a fundamental change in how marriage is viewed. Today we see getting married as finding a life partner. Someone we love. But this whole idea of marrying for happiness and love is relatively new.

For most of the history of our species, courtship and marriage weren’t really about two individuals finding love and fulfillment. According to the historian Stephanie Coontz, author of *Marriage, a History*, until recently a marital union was primarily important for establishing a bond between two families. It was about achieving

security—financial, social, and personal. It was about creating conditions that made it possible to survive and reproduce.

This is not ancient history. Until the Industrial Revolution, most Americans and Europeans lived on farms, and everybody in the household needed to work. Considerations about whom to marry were primarily practical.

In the past, a guy would be thinking, *Oh, shit, I gotta have kids to work on my farm. I need four-year-old kids performing manual labor ASAP. And I need a woman who can make me clothes. I better get on this.* A woman would think, *I better find a dude who's capable on the farm and good with a plow so I don't starve and die.*

Making sure the person shared your interest in sushi and Wes Anderson movies *and* made you get a boner anytime you touched her hair would seem far too picky.

Of course, people did get married because they loved each other, but their expectations about what love would bring were different from those we hold today. For families whose future security depended on their children making good matches, passion was seen as an extremely risky motivation for getting hitched. “Marriage was too vital an economic and political institution to be entered into solely on the basis of something as irrational as love,” writes Coontz.⁴

Coontz also told us that before the 1960s most middle-class people had pretty rigid, gender-based expectations about what each person would bring to a marriage. Women wanted financial security. Men wanted virginity and weren't concerned with deeper qualities like education or intelligence.

“The average couple wed after just six months—a pretty good sign that love was still filtered through strong gender stereotypes rather than being based on deep knowledge of the other partner as an individual,” she said.

Not that people who got married before the 1960s had loveless marriages. On the contrary, back then couples often developed increasingly intense feelings for each other as they spent

time together, growing up and building their families. These marriages may have started with a simmer, but over time they could build to a boil.

But a lot of things changed in the 1960s and 1970s, including our expectations of what we should get out of a marriage. The push for women's equality was a big driver of the transformation. As more women went to college, got good jobs, and achieved economic independence, they established newfound control over their bodies and their lives. A growing number of women refused to marry the guy in their neighborhood or building. They wanted to experience things too, and they now had the freedom to do it.

According to Cherlin, the generation that came of age during the sixties and seventies rejected companionate marriage and began to pursue something greater. They didn't merely want a spouse—they wanted a soul mate.

By the 1980s, 86 percent of American men and 91 percent of American women said they would not marry someone without the presence of romantic love.⁵

The soul mate marriage is very different from the companionate marriage. It's not about finding someone decent to start a family with. It's about finding the perfect person whom you truly, deeply love. Someone you want to share the rest of your life with. Someone with whom, when you smell a certain T-shirt they own, you are instantly whisked to a happy memory about the time he or she made you breakfast and you both stayed in and binge-watched all eight seasons of *Perfect Strangers*.

We want something that's very passionate, or boiling, from the get-go. In the past, people weren't looking for something boiling; they just needed some water. Once they found it and committed to a life together, they did their best to heat things up. Now, if things aren't boiling, committing to marriage seems premature.

But searching for a soul mate takes a long time and requires enormous emotional investment. The problem is that this search

for the perfect person can generate a lot of stress. Younger generations face immense pressure to find the “perfect person” that simply didn’t exist in the past when “good enough” was good enough.

When they’re successful, though, the payoff is incredible. According to Cherlin, the soul mate marriage has the highest potential for happiness, and it delivers levels of fulfillment that the generation of older people I interviewed rarely reached.

Cherlin is also well aware of how hard it is to sustain all these good things, and he claims that today’s soul mate marriage model has the highest potential for disappointment. Since our expectations are so high, today people are quick to break things off when their relationship doesn’t meet them (touch the hair, no boner). Cherlin would also like me to reiterate that this hair/boner analogy is mine and mine alone.

The psychotherapist Esther Perel has counseled hundreds of couples who are having trouble in their marriages, and as she sees things, asking all of this from a marriage puts a lot of pressure on relationships. In her words:

Marriage was an economic institution in which you were given a partnership for life in terms of children and social status and succession and companionship. But now we want our partner to still give us all these things, but in addition I want you to be my best friend and my trusted confidant and my passionate lover to boot, and we live twice as long. So we come to one person, and we basically are asking them to give us what once an entire village used to provide: Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge. Give me novelty, give me familiarity. Give me predictability, give me surprise. And we think it’s a given, and toys and lingerie are going to save us with that.⁶

Ideally, though, we’re lucky, and we find our soul mate and enjoy that life-changing mother lode of happiness.

But a soul mate is a very hard thing to find.

FINDING YOUR SOUL MATE

Okay, so no one said searching for a soul mate would be easy. Still, in many ways it seems like today's generation of singles is better off because of the changes in modern romance. Taking time to develop ourselves and date different people before we get married helps us make better choices. For instance, people who marry after the age of twenty-five are far less likely to divorce than those who get married young.⁷

We also don't even *have* to get married if we don't want to. Getting married and starting a family was once seemingly the only reasonable life course. Today we've become far more accepting of alternative lifestyles, and people move in and out of different situations: single with roommates, single and solo, single with partner, married, divorced, divorced and living with an iguana, remarried with iguana, then divorced with seven iguanas because your iguana obsession ruined your relationship, and, finally, single with six iguanas (Arturo was sadly run over by an ice cream truck).

There are no longer any predetermined life paths. Each of us is on our own.

When we do marry, we are marrying for love. We are finding our soul mates. And the tools we have to find our soul mates are incredible. We aren't limited to just the bing-bongs who live in our building. We have online dating that gives us access to millions and millions of bing-bongs around the world. We can filter them any way we want. When we go out, we can use smartphones to text any number of suitors while we are out barhopping. We aren't constrained by landlines and relegated to whomever we have made firm plans with.

Our romantic options are unprecedented and our tools to sort and communicate with them are staggering.

And that raises the question: Why are so many people frustrated?

For the book, Eric and I wanted to see what would happen if we were able to gather groups from different generations to discuss dating past and present. We organized a large focus group of two hundred people.

We sent out an invite and said that anyone who attended had to bring one or two parents to the event. Then, when people showed up, we split the families into two different sections—young folks on the left and parents on the right. We spent an hour going back and forth between the sides, asking people to explain how they met new people to date, asked each other out, and made decisions about marriage and commitment.

When we talked to the older people who were in happy, successful marriages, the way they had met sounded quaint and simple, with much less stress than singles go through today. Sure, they met at a young age and probably weren't as sophisticated then as they later became, but as one woman told me: "We grew up and changed together. And here we are in our sixties, still together."

People from the older generation there that night had almost always asked each other out immediately over the phone or in person. This is how a gentleman named Tim described the first time he asked out his future wife: "I saw her at school, and I said, 'You know, I have these tickets to see the Who at Madison Square Garden . . .'"

That sounds infinitely cooler than texting back and forth with a girl for two weeks only to have her flake on seeing a Sugar Ray concert.

When I talked to the people about dating back in the day, they said they'd go to one bar or a mixer, which was like a community dance, usually put on by a church or college or other local institution, where young people could talk and meet. They'd stay there the whole night and have one or two drinks.

That seems more pleasant than what I see out in bars today, which is usually a bunch of people staring at their phones trying to find someone or something more exciting than where they are.

What about all our options? We can find the perfect person now, right? The old folks actually saw all this choice as a *disadvantage*. They expressed sympathy and concern about their children's situation—and gratitude that things had been simpler, albeit far from perfect, when they were young.

"Something I have to say in defense of the young folks today is that there's just so many choices out there," one mom said. "When I was growing up, there was a mixer and there was a bar, and that was about it. But now—my god. I would really hate to be single nowadays."

"Why do you think it's so bad for them?" I asked. "Think about all the options young people have now, all the doors that are there for them to open."

The older folks weren't buying it. They understood that they had had fewer options when they were growing up, but, intriguingly, they didn't seem to regret having fewer choices. As one woman explained, "You didn't think about the choices you had. When you found someone you liked, you jumped into a relationship. I don't think we thought, *Well, there are another twelve doors or another seventeen doors or another four hundred and thirty-three doors,*" she said. "We saw a door we wanted, and so we took it."

Now, look at my generation. We're in a hallway with *millions* of doors. That's a lot of doors. It's nice to have all those options.

But—a hallway with *millions* of doors? Is that better? Is it terrifying?

On the one hand, you have so many doors to try. And that sounds better than being shoved into a door when you are really young and maybe not quite ready to be an adult. On the other hand, maybe people in those earlier generations were ready to open a door on their own. After all, think of Amelia, Victoria, and all those other women who were dying to get out of their parents' houses for good and pretty happy to race into the first door they saw. Sometimes the marriages they raced into wound up being lonely and difficult. But often they blossomed into something loving and fulfilling.

Today we want a bunch of doors as options and we are very cautious about which one we open. The emerging adulthood phase of life is basically a pass society gives you to hang out in the hallway and figure out what door is really right for you. Being in that hallway might be frustrating at times, but ideally you grow and mature, and you find a door that really works for you when you're ready.

People who are looking for love today have an unprecedented set of options in the search for an amazing romantic partner or, ideally, soul mate. We can marry pretty much whomever we want to, regardless of their sex, gender, ethnicity, religion, or race—or even location. We're more likely than the generations that came before us to have relationships in which both partners are equals. And, unlike many in prior generations, nearly all of us will only marry someone we love.

The thing is, with all these new possibilities, the *process* of finding that person can be seriously stressful. And, unlike the days when most everyone got married by their midtwenties, today the search for love can go on for decades.

No more marrying the upstairs neighbor or the girl next door.

No more going steady (forever) with your high school sweetheart.

No more “Hey, Mom and Dad, that person in the living room seems nice. Cool if we get married in three months?”

Instead we have a whole new romantic culture based on an epic search for the right person. A search that can take us through college and various career stages. A search that also takes new forms, because in today's romantic climate a lot of the action happens on our screens.

PHONE WORLD

In 2014 the average American spent 444 minutes per day—nearly 7.5 hours—in front of a screen, be it a smartphone, tablet, television, or personal computer. That's higher than the numbers in most European countries, where people spend

“only” 5 to 7 hours per day with screens, yet it’s not nearly enough to put the United States in the top five nations: China, Brazil, Vietnam, the Philippines, and, in first place, Indonesia, where people spend 9 hours per day staring at a screen.⁸

That 7.5 hours number is really high, but I charted my own use and it doesn’t seem too implausible. Today is a fairly normal Sunday morning in Los Angeles for me. I woke up and spent a while texting with my friends Nick and Chelsea about a potential brunch destination. I then hopped on my laptop to research the suggested restaurants. I went on Yelp and the restaurant pages to peep the menus and did random browsing in between (reading whatever silly headlines caught my eye on Reddit* and watching highlights from the previous night’s *Saturday Night Live*), then eventually, after about twenty back-and-forths that lasted an hour and seven minutes, Chelsea and Nick decided they just wanted to go to a casual diner nearby. I didn’t feel like going there. We didn’t even end up getting brunch together.

Instead I went to another place, Canelé, with another brunch crew. During that brunch, a Nelly song came on and I researched the Nelly Wikipedia page, as one must do anytime Nelly-related questions plague one’s mind. After brunch, on the way home, I texted with a few other people about potential dinner plans.[†] And now I’m at home on a laptop again, typing out stuff for this chapter that you are reading right now, possibly on a screen as well!

The way I spent the day trying to plan brunch is remarkably similar to how my tenure in the single world went as well: making or attempting to make plans on my phone with whoever was in my dating orbit at the time. Like my brunch with Chelsea and Nick, many times these plans would eventually fall through. And in the

* The highlight being a video of a group of kids who turned their door into a “door monster” that gave out Halloween candy. The door was old-timey and had two smaller shutters in the upper left and right that opened, and they put eyes in them and then put a brown felt-covered arm that poked out through another opening so it was a “door monster” giving out candy. It was pretty cute.

† This experiment has made it very clear that the majority of my day is spent on my phone or laptop trying to figure out both *where* and with *whom* I am dining.

same way I cautiously researched these restaurants, young singles are researching one another—on dating sites or social media sites or even just doing general Googling to get a better sense of a potential date.

As I've come to see it, we're spending so much time with our digital devices because we've all developed our own personal "phone worlds."

Through our phone world we are connected to anyone and everyone in our lives, from our parents to a casual acquaintance whom we friend on Facebook. For younger generations, their social lives play out through social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, and Facebook as much as through campuses, cafés, and clubs. But in recent years, as more and more adults have begun spending more and more time on their own digital devices, just about everybody with the means to buy a device and a data plan has become a hyper-engaged participant in their phone world.

Phone world is the place you go when you want to find someone to see a movie with. It's where you go to decide what movie to go see. It's where you buy the tickets. It's where you let your friend know you have arrived at the theater. It's where your friend tells you, "Shit, I'm at the wrong theater," and where you say, "What the fuck, man? You always do this. Fine. I'm off to see *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* alone, AGAIN."

And now that our phone worlds are integral to even the most mundane of tasks, of course, they are also a big part of where we live our romantic lives.

Today, if you own a smartphone, you're carrying a 24-7 singles bar in your pocket. Press a few buttons at any time of the day, and you're instantly immersed in an ocean of romantic possibilities.

At first, swimming through that ocean may seem amazing. But most modern singles quickly realize that it takes a ton of ef-

fort to stay afloat, and even more to find the right person and get to shore together.

There's so much going on in those waters, so many quick decisions and difficult moves to make. And of all the challenges, there's none more daunting than figuring out what to do when you find someone who interests you.

As we saw in my example with Tanya, no matter how simple it may seem, the initial ask can be plagued with stress and frightening ramifications.