

Trading Fantasy For Real Life Relationships: Four Ways To Find Magic In The Daily Grind

It's a trap we love to fall into: That Hollywood-style romance, famous in chick flicks, in which storm-tossed lovers run through airports, go back in time, or rediscover an old flame against ridiculous odds.

You don't need me to tell you those silver screen relationships aren't real. You know very well that all the boring scenes from real life relationships would fill not only the cutting room floor, but also the entire room itself!

The average, everyday stuff of life is totally lacking in drama, at least the kind that sweeps you off your feet...

There are dishes left in the sink; a schedule full of commitments to children, extended family, careers, and community; allergies, windows that need washing, taxes, bills, and burned toast. Hardly glamorous!

So what is it about fantasy that sweeps us away? That answer is different for everyone. For some it's the excitement of being seen anew in the eyes of a new partner. For some it may be the adventure of experiencing new things with a whole new cast of characters. For others it may be the comfort of someone to walk by your side, a respite from being solo. Some people like the challenge of winning over another person.

In every case, a new relationship is exciting because of the intensity of the emotions that go along with it.

If it bleeds it leads.

Just look at the news. Journalists and other media professionals know that most compelling stories are emotion-based, intensely fear-based, and sprinkled with negatively arousing drama. Unfortunately, this sensational way of storytelling makes people fearful over the most statistically unlikely situations. The resulting distorted view of reality affects us on a primal level.

For example, if someone is kidnapped, suddenly there are a slew of stories about kidnapping. You're led to believe it happens all the time when the truth is, there are a lot of safe kids out there!

It's the same with the media's version of romance. We are drawn to heart-based stories, but we have to put our logical heads on. Just because a story is emotional and exciting, doesn't mean it accurately reflects reality.

Hollywood enraptures us with emotional movies as well as an overblown portrayal of movie stars' personal lives. We know they put their pants on one leg at a time, just like everyone else, but the details of their lives (the ones exploited in tabloids) are over the top and bizarre. We're hooked.

Diversion from the Mundane

We love the idea of love at first sight and happily ever after, but to some extent this false image tarnishes the true, gritty relationships that we were made to enjoy.

No doubt about it, even the healthiest couples experience relationships that could never be contained in one 2-hour film. Relationships are wiggly, messy things, lacking seamless editing, a unified plot, and a gorgeous backdrop. And we're all too familiar with them.

That's why we love to go to the movies and peruse the racks of magazines in the checkout line. It's a glossed-over, easy-to-digest, altered version of reality *just barely* similar enough to ours, so that we can conveniently form opinions and preferences about the things we observe from afar.

In some ways these fantastic portrayals of relationships shape us. We imagine how relationships "should go" based on the ones we see and hear about. But we rarely get an inside look at even our acquaintances' relationships. Most people show one side to the world and keep private stuff behind closed doors.

However, we view screenwriters' versions of people every time we go to the theater. We're entertained by intimate details of imaginary characters. Furthermore, we take in moments caught by a paparazzi's camera and think we know "from a trusted source" what goes on in the lives of people we will never meet.

If I could shake America of its addiction to infatuation and media fantasies I would do it in a heartbeat. Real life is so much juicier!

Still, it's not really our fault. We are tempted by the emotions first, and come to our senses with the steady grooming of logic. That second part – the voice of reason – can be cultivated, but we first have to understand why we fall so hard for the fantasy of perfect, Hollywood style "love."

The Infatuation Station

Who doesn't put their best foot forward on a first date (or fifth, or tenth)? We crave details about every little thing our new boyfriend or girlfriend ever did, from where they went to summer camp as a kid to their bucket list of dream vacations. Every word they utter is an adorable revelation.

This early infatuation is a healthy part of new relationships because it inspires us to share the important stuff fast. It's like decorating the door for a party before the music even starts.

The brain may be partly responsible for this exaggerated high, due to the chemical dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with "euphoria, sleeplessness, loss of appetite and a rush of motivation. In other words, the dazzling beginnings of love," says anthropologist Helen Fisher. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200909/the-plunge-pleasure>

Sadly, some people never seem to grasp the concept that infatuation is meant to fade. Those roller coaster feelings that trigger an immediate connection are not sustainable over the long term. When a crush gives way to something deeper and more permanent -- that is, when you're called to express concern with the other's well being instead of what's in it for you -- that's when the true test begins.

The surface is a fun place to hang out, that's for sure! Of the couples I've counseled, most recognize that love is not as exciting as infatuation. It's just more real. Unfortunately, when it stops feeling exciting and fun, when the rubber meets the road, that's when some of them believe it can't be love anymore.

If we believe love is what infatuation feels like, then we're always going to fail. Dissatisfaction creeps into the relationship if couples are not prepared to weather the daily grind together. When that dazzling spark starts to burn out, *as it's supposed to*, those people will think love has died. And that's the most unfortunate perception of all.

Real love is not adrenaline based.

The *better* drama unfolds when we take a chance on real relationships.

That sense of wonder at uncharted territory, the amazement that comes with infatuation, is certainly something you can work with. The mature adult focuses on the future of their partnership because they understand that, unlike a neatly packaged Hollywood movie, we can't predict what will happen. If you truly care about the other person, this trek into the unknown holds a different kind of fascination.

Great relationships are filled with boring, often conflict-ridden days and weeks, but if you're looking for them, you'll share moments of delight and excitement. These moments can be just as pleasant, if not more so, as the first, heady days of new love.

It takes work, though. And it requires a mindset of appreciation. Here are some ways I've seen my clients mature in their appreciation of their partner:

1. **Pace yourself.** When you're just getting to know someone, it's okay to let love bloom naturally. You don't have to obsess over all your new moments together, worry about family history, or future holiday plans. Don't build a castle around this new liaison; just let things unfold in a relaxed way. It's important not to get physical too soon, either. That's the most disastrous intimacy killer you could introduce!

2. **See the big picture inside small actions.** Sometimes the recognition that a partner tried something new for the other's sake, or postponed some enjoyment of their own in order to support the other, is enough to keep the fire burning. Recognition is the key here. What seems to you a small concession is a sign of a larger commitment.

3. **Teamwork.** Successful couples see their relationship as a work in progress and go at it as a team. When storm clouds gather, it's not the end of the world. Like a garden that yields abundant food and flowers, the relationship requires some rainfall, pruning, and heavy lifting. But a strong couple digs in together and does the work.

4. **Stay connected to "you."** Keep up with your hobbies and friends. Don't abandon the things you love and replace them with your partner's. Nurture friendships and experiences with your time and attention to feel whole and happy -- even after you've met Mr. or Ms. Wonderful.

In spite of Hollywood's version of love, the kind that looks so easy and magical the Gods must be smiling on them; there's hope for real people to experience deep and lasting love.

The everyday stuff may not make the cut for a movie version of your relationship, but it's what makes for an ageless classic.