

## **“Before You Get Engaged” Book Excerpt**

*From Chapter Nine - Are You Better Together Than Apart?*

**T**hirty years ago I faced a dating decision that I sensed could impact the rest of my life. Looking back, I can honestly say it has.

The decision came during my senior year in college. At the time, I was a student at Westmont College, but I was away from the Santa Barbara campus for a semester. For four months I, along with thirty other sociology students from Westmont, was living and taking classes in San Francisco.

We were in an urban studies program. Our curriculum included classes taught by Westmont professors, but the program’s primary focus was on practical experiences in the city. My thinking was radically changed by my dropout prevention internship assignment and the downright frightening city life experiences that made up the program. The police car ride-alongs and being dropped off to live on the streets of San Francisco for three days with only a dollar in my pocket changed me. It also made me wonder if I would ever see Bernice again.

My dating relationship with Bernice began in earnest two years prior to my San Francisco experience. Bernice and I knew each other because we attended the same church and high school. After a couple of false starts, our casual friendship turned into a serious dating relationship while Bernice was a senior in high school and I was a sophomore in college. Through a series of what I would call divine circumstances, we both ended up attending Westmont. Our dating relationship continued to grow while we enjoyed our first year on the picturesque Santa Barbara campus. But my enrollment in the Westmont Urban Studies program meant I would be living five hundred miles away from Bernice for four months.

Four months is a long time to be away from someone with whom you’ve had a two-year dating relationship. The time and distance alone will show you what you have or don’t have as a couple. It will also test your commitment. It did mine—especially after Mary Beth and I became friends.

Mary Beth was one of my classmates in Westmont’s Urban Studies program. She and I ended up getting to know each other pretty well, partly because we were paired together on several class projects and assignments. But then we, along with some of the other students, also started to hang out together. Over the next four months our casual relationship turned into a close friendship.

I can remember having long conversations with Mary Beth about our dreams and desires. We played tennis and board games together. We learned to juggle together. We had fun together in the city. From trolley car rides to Sunday services at various churches, we shared many enjoyable experiences.

Then it hit me. I was faced with a choice. Bernice and I were still dating. She still considered me her boyfriend, and I still considered her my girlfriend. So what did that make Mary Beth? I was at a crossroads. Would my relationship with Mary Beth continue as a friendship, or would I pursue something more? Was I ready to give up my dating relationship with Bernice and seek more than a friendship with Mary Beth?

It took awhile for me to sort out my conflicted feelings and thoughts. I wanted to be sure that whatever happened, I didn't make a foolish decision that I would later regret. I can remember spending a significant amount of time praying and asking God for wisdom and focusing on the ways our lives could complement each other.

Well, since thirty years later I'm married to Bernice, what I ultimately concluded is obvious. I realized that Bernice and I together could make an incredible couple. Our strengths and differences complemented each other perfectly. Once this realization came into focus, I made a singular commitment to keep dating Bernice with the thought that one day we might get married.

## WHEN DIFFERENT IS GOOD

The idea of a couple marrying because they complement each other isn't an insignificant sidelight. It's an essential consideration and legitimate reason for marriage. In fact, it's at the heart of why God created a man and woman to enjoy life together.

From the beginning of time, God said "it's not good for the man to be alone."<sup>1</sup> So God created a man and woman to complement each other—in body, soul, and spirit. Man needed "a helper."<sup>2</sup> Together they could *do more* and *be more* than they would have if they had lived life alone. Their differences and similarities would mold them each into better people.

As I look at my life today and through the past thirty years, it's obvious I've needed a "helper." Just ask my kids and colleagues. My life has been so much better than it would have been had Bernice not been my wife. To this day, I know I owe most of my accomplishments in the home, work, and community to God's incredible work through Bernice and the many ways she has complemented my life. (She just leaned over my shoulder and said that I've complemented her life too.)

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## BRENT

This is true. I can affirm that my parents complement each other greatly. This chapter of course brings up a question I should probably ask: Are there places in my life where I need someone else to help me be better and more capable? The answer is obviously no; I've pretty much got everything figured out. Kidding. There are numerous areas in my life where I know I need help. I am reminded of them often.

At this point in my life, I've done enough work and ministry to realize that I am not capable of doing everything in the entire world, as I want to believe I am. Actually, I think it's common for all of us to go through a time in our life when we think we know everything. I like to refer to this stage of life as "college." When I would visit my parents while in college, I'd spout off all this new stuff I'd learned and things I wanted to do. It was an incredibly exciting time, and I think part of a natural progression towards adulthood. For some this behavior happens earlier or later than college. Unfortunately, for some, this stage lasts their entire lives.

Now, a few years after college, I can see in hindsight that it could have been dangerous to make an important relational decision (i.e., engagement or marriage), while thinking I knew it all. I very easily could have married the wrong person because I was unaware of my weaknesses that needed complementing. The decision back then would have been based more on how much fun we had together. Now I'm focusing more on how well we complement each other.

Through many failures, I eventually learned the hard way that I have many weaknesses, and now that I see these weaknesses, it is rather exciting to see someone come into my life who can help offset some of them.

Whether it's related to something simple like my social skills or something more complex like how I make decisions, I definitely want to be with someone who can help me where I'm helpless. I think that's one of the great things about good relationships.

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#### DAVE

When I work with couples who are considering marriage, I encourage them to think about the ways their similarities and differences could add to or subtract from their relationship. A few areas you may want to consider might include:

- How are you similar and different in your personalities? In your perspectives?
- What activities and interests do you share in common? Are there any?
- Do you like the same types of food?
- Are you introverts or extroverts, or a combination of both?
- How does each of you handle conflict?
- Do you each come from a home of one child? Two or more? What does this mean in your relationship?
- How do you handle money?