Commodity dating?

By Amy Frykholm
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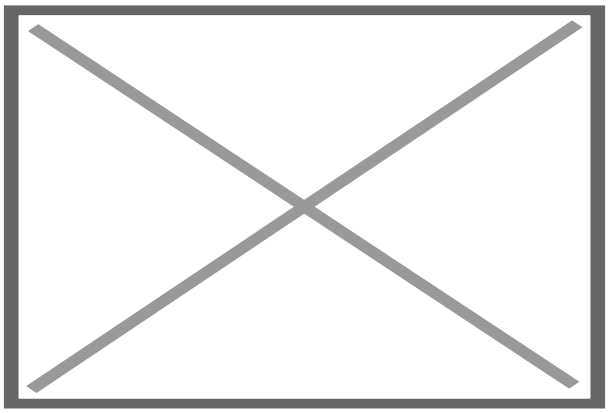

The cover story of the November issue of the Atlantic is about why women don't marry. On the back cover of the print edition is an advertisement for engagement rings. This doesn't strike me as an accident.

Here's the logic of Kate Bolick's article: There are fewer "marriageable" men, so women are having to tough it out on their own. The crux of her argument comes five pages in:

> *If dating and mating is in fact a marketplace--and of course it is--today we are contending with a new "dating gap," where marriage-minded women are increasingly confronted with either deadbeats or players.*

But what about that "of course"? For me, that's the heart of the problem.

I am the same age as Kate Bolick, 39, and we share the same profession--writing. In terms of race, ethnicity and socioeconomics, we likewise inhabit the same approximate sphere (although her part of that sphere is probably way cooler and more interesting than mine).

I married my husband at the young age of 24. She has spent much more time in the dating "game" and is still looking around. Following the logic of the article, I won something in that game and she lost something, but I just don't see it that way.

My husband and my marriage are not prizes, lottery tickets or possessions. I did not win or purchase him in the marketplace of courtship. She did not lose in the marketplace of life. I didn't bargain with marriage for my career; she didn't trade in anything. We use these metaphors all the time as if they don't have power, yet we forget that we are talking about are humans. "Dating and mating" is only a marketplace if we consent to being commodities.

To think outside the marketplace is tricky in our society. We've been fooled into thinking that dating, weddings and marriage all revolve around buying stuff. My husband and I were quaintly determined not to be objects for each other. He did not buy me an engagement ring. I refused to wear white. I worried incessantly about buying into a bourgeois idea of marriage that meant that our commitment to each other was really about matching tea towels and a good set of pots and pans.

We had the idea--and we weren't certain we could live it out--that a deep relationship with each other could help us become better people, could somehow make us more free. There is nothing exceptional about this idea, and there is no reason to either gloat or apologize about having tried to live it.

At the end of her article, Bolick starts to look in a more promising direction: intentional community. So far, she can only see women in these communities, but if she keeps looking, I think she'll find men interested in figuring out how we can be human together. Meanwhile, let's remember that those "deadbeats and players" out there are humans, not possessions I collect as I move up an imaginary ladder. They have passions and ideas and stories. They have successes and failures. Until we start to see each other as something other than markers of our successes, we will be condemned to the dating game.