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## Valentine's Day: Decades Vs. Decadence

Long-married couples offer relationship advice that has nothing to do with an obnoxious red teddy bear holding an I-love-you sign.

By Emily Beers

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All illustrations: Donovan Winters/CrossFit Journal

We're good at Valentine's Day.

Or at the very least, we're really on top of it. From fine chocolates and red-and-pink candies to "love-scented shampoo" and body butter, shelves are stocked with heart-shaped everything the moment Christmas ends.

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Girls are good at pretending they don't want anything for Valentine's Day—almost pleading ignorance that the day even exists—and men are even better at realizing that many women actually want that stuffed dog holding the giant red heart.

Valentine's Day has been around for centuries—though perhaps not in the modern sense. Early modern customs were actually developed in England and spread through the English-speaking world in the 19th century. Today, the tradition of a “love day” has spread all over the world.

According to Wikipedia, China's version of Valentine's Day is called Qixi Festival, and it falls on the seventh day of the seventh month in the Chinese calendar: Aug. 2 in 2014. In the Middle East, Iran's Sepandarmazgan festival falls on Feb. 18 and is dedicated to affection for wives and mothers. Interestingly, Iran officially banned Valentine's Day and its symbols in 2011, though reports indicate the ban is somewhat less than effective in preventing Iranians from expressing their love through cards and gifts.

And here in North America, Feb. 14 allows flower stores to make a killing on roses and sweetheart bouquets, while restaurants enjoy one of the busiest nights of the year. Children in grade school pass around cards and candies, women feel pressure to find a date, and men are expected to pay for a lavish night.

While we're good at giving in to Valentine's Day, we're arguably less successful with actual relationships.

The obvious statistics are those that estimate about 40 or 50 percent of people who vow to love each until death won't end up honoring their vows. And perhaps even more people suffer from commitment phobia and won't get anywhere near a ring in the first place.

But some women—women who have been married for 50-plus years—believe today's ladies are more focused on the flowers and fluffy heart pillows they receive on Valentine's Day than they are on their relationships. These great grandmothers and grandmothers also suggest modern young ladies might be more interested in planning a badass bridal shower, an overpriced engagement party and an over-the-top wedding reception than in caring for their actual marriage.

And while members of the previous generation admit they might have a few things to learn from the younger generation about celebrating Valentine's Day in modern style, these elders know a lot about how to keep a marriage alive.



### Joe and June Embury

Joe and June have been married for 69 years. Although they were just teenagers when they began courting, they still remember their early dates.

Now living in Tennessee, they met while living in the small town of Camillus, N.Y. At the time, Joe had gone into the military, and he served with the U.S. Navy during World War II. June was just 16 years old when she was introduced to Joe.

“I liked him. I don't know if I fell in love with him that first date, but many dates later I sure did,” said the 87-year-old June, a grandmother of 10 and great grandmother of 19.

Joe agreed.

“I don't know if I immediately recognized that she was the one, but it sure didn't take long to convince me,” the 90-year-old said.

Those early courting days weren't easy for Joe and June. Joe was away at officer school much of the time, and they were lucky if they got to see each other on the weekends.



Courtesy of Allison Scabill

**Joe and June Embury were married in 1945 and are as in love today as they were then.**

But something in their hearts convinced them to fight through the constant separation.

After two years of courting, the couple was married in the summer of 1945. The wedding was very simple by today's standards. Almost seven decades later, Joe and June, whose three grown boys are all still married to their first wives, admit they are still in love. And they banter back and forth just the way you'd expect from partners of 69 years.

"I'm more and more in love with him every day," June said.

"I couldn't be any better today," Joe said.

"He always says that," June added with a laugh.

Their relationship has continued to flourish over the course of 69 years, and June said a few important reasons stand out.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's about putting each other first, and I mean before anybody else. Wouldn't you say so, Joe?" June asked her husband.

"That's right," Joe reassured.

"And we have never gone to sleep angry at each other," June added. "You should resolve your problem before you go to sleep ... it might be 2 in the morning before you go to sleep, but you shouldn't go to sleep angry."

She thought for a moment before adding: "Our other rule we have lived by is that we'd never go someplace alone unless we're sure we can kiss goodbye."

"June keeps me better fed than anyone in the neighborhood," Joe interrupted.

"I love to cook and bake. I love to entertain, although we don't entertain as much as we used to," said June, who spent many years as a 24-hour-a-day homemaker.

June admitted she and Joe do have their disagreements and challenges, but she said that's just part of life. Their faith in God has helped them work through many of the inevitable difficulties that have come up through the years.

"We've always had our faith if something was bothering us," June said. "I think that's helped us, don't you Joe?"

"Yes, it has," Joe replied. "The biggest challenge has been recognizing that you're on the same page, even though you might not always read the same words."

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**—June Embury**

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For Joe and June, marriage has always been something they've taken very seriously. They made vows to each other in 1945, and breaking them has never been an option. They're suspicious that today's generation doesn't feel the same way about making a promise.

"I don't think young people today take their vows seriously enough. We vowed to love each other until death do us part, and we do," June said.

"So many people today want to keep their independence, even though they're married," Joe said.

June added: "I think you do need to keep some independence, but your spouse still needs to come first."

Of course, it's easier to put each other first when you're with the right person. June warned young women to make sure they know what they're getting into. She believes people should make sure they're with the right person and avoid rushing into wedlock, while Joe thinks new spouses need to be prepared to work as partners rather than individuals who live in the same home.

"You can no longer just consider yourself when you're making decisions," Joe said.

"It's true. We have never made an important decision on our own. We've made them all together," June added.

"And finances and feelings—nothing is hidden. Make sure the spouse always knows what's going on," Joe added.

Today, Joe and June have plenty of time to keep each other in the loop with what's going on. They spend a great deal of time together and said they never get sick of it.

"We're finally getting to an age where we like to stay home," June said.

### **Virginia and Ron Monk**

For 77-year-old Virginia and 79-year-old Ron Monk, their deep love for each other has always held their marriage together.

For Virginia, meeting Ron was almost a love-at-first-sight situation. She was a 16-year-old student in Montreal, Canada, and she rode the bus to school every day. Often, she saw Ron on the bus and was instantly attracted to him.

"So I made some inquiries about Ron, and turns out he had a girlfriend," Virginia remembered.

Pretty soon, though, Ron was single, and one night Virginia's girlfriend dared her to call him.

"So I did. I put a handkerchief over the mouthpiece and blocked my nose and called him. I didn't want him to recognize my voice," Virginia laughed at her girlish silliness. "I don't know why I thought he might recognize my voice, though."

But she didn't fool him. Ron knew exactly who she was.

"You travel on the bus and you wear a green coat," Ron said to Virginia.

After that first phone call, Ron asked Virginia on a proper date.

"In those days, things were very different. Girls didn't call guys," Virginia said. "The only reason I phoned him was because it was a dare, so I thought it was safe."

She added: "A guy didn't appreciate getting a call from a girl then. He needed to make the call. But it turned out OK. We've been married for 55 years."

Six years after that first call, Ron and Virginia finally got married.

"In those days, that's all you did. You could be a nurse or teach or maybe be a secretary—or just get married," she said.

Virginia thinks marriage might have been simpler for her generation than it is today.



"There wasn't as much for us in those days. We weren't exposed to as much. My focus in life was to get married and have a family, so it was very easy for me to fit into that pattern," she said.

"I grew up with parents, where my father was the head of the family. There were roles that were played, and Ron and I are probably two of the last of those kind of people. We have definite roles in our relationship," she said.

Ron was always the breadwinner, while Virginia looked after the house and their four children. Virginia said children were both the biggest blessing and biggest challenge in her marriage.

"We had problems with Drew, our son, when he was 16. We ended up having to kick him out of the house," she said. "Today, we have a wonderful relationship with him, but back then it was one of the biggest stresses in our lives."

She added: "It's very difficult to always track in the same direction, especially being a mother, I think. It was hard. Ron and I didn't always agree about how to parent."

Ultimately, the love and commitment behind their marriage kept them working together.

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End of story.  
You make it work."**

**—Virginia Monk**

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"We had strength behind us that held us together. The love that we had for each other to begin with helped us get through it. The love was always there, and we could always fall back on it. It was always for better or worse—that's it. End of story. You make it work. So we just weathered those storms as they came," she said.

Virginia said she doesn't often see this kind of commitment in many marriages today. Even two of her children have remarried. She believes it's a change of priorities in society today that has led to marriages falling apart.

"Today, it's so easy to walk away from a relationship," she said with a shrug.

For her, walking away was never even an option. Instead, her marriage—and her love for Ron—has only grown stronger over the years.

"It's a different kind of love now. I would say I probably love him more now, and he would say the same thing, too," Virginia said. "We appreciate each other more now than ever."

### **The Gift of Love**

Like June and Virginia, Pat Grieve has also been married for 50-plus years. The 76-year-old met her Scottish immigrant husband Roy when she was just a teenager, and 53 years later their marriage is strong.



Courtesy of Pat Grieve

*After 53 years of marriage, Pat Grieve said she believes no marriage is perfect, but that doesn't mean you should give up so easily.*

"I was going to the dance with one fellow, and I had a girlfriend who needed a date, so she went with Roy. And I guess he liked me better," laughed Pat, who now lives in the small town of Peachland, Canada.

Pat doesn't believe in one secret to marriage, and she's realistic that it's never easy.

"There's no such thing as a 100 percent happy relationship between two people; I don't care who you are," Pat said. "You couldn't live with anyone for a great length of time without getting into disagreement. People who say they never argue, I don't believe them."

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**—Pat Grieve**

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She added: "I told this to someone the other day: There are ups and there are downs, but as long as there are more ups than downs, you're OK. Every day isn't perfect, so you find someone you want to be with, and, well, you be with them."

Pat suspects that what's missing from many marriages today is the sense of commitment that was instilled in both women and men of her generation.

"I think young ones today are too quick to call it quits after a disagreement or things not going the way they want them to," she said.

She continued: "Things were different back then... People felt they had to make it work. There was sort of a stigma attached to being divorced."

Pat, June and Virginia all have a similar attitude when they talk about their commitments they've held onto over many decades, through all of life's ups and downs, and all three suggest the younger generation doesn't take commitment seriously. It's their opinion, but perhaps they're right. Maybe our Internet-driven, all-right-now, pay-on-credit modern society doesn't foster the kind of character and

## Valentine's Day ... (continued)

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commitment needed to sustain a relationship beyond the honeymoon phase. For many, it seems easier to replace something than to fix it.

"Today's generation is maybe too used to having all the things they want right away," Pat said.

Never is this more evident than on Valentine's Day, a day of unnecessary lavishness for many. Interestingly, neither Pat nor Virginia nor June has ever really celebrated Valentine's Day. In fact, gift-giving has never been a huge priority in any of their marriages. Things were simpler for them.

Virginia believes some people might focus so hard on things such as weddings and anniversaries because something is missing from their relationship.

"The same could be true of Valentine's Day. Maybe people need some kind of reminder that their partner cares about them in the form of a piece of jewelry or a box of flowers," she said.

"I mean, I like getting nice things, but even at Christmastime we never made a big deal about gifts. And now we have everything we want. Why would we want another bit of something we're not going to use?" she asked.

Similarly, Pat passes on presents.

"We haven't done anything for years, nor do we do much on birthdays, except for a nice card and maybe out for dinner ... . My mother used to say, 'Actions speak louder than words,' so all the flowers and presents in the world would mean nothing if there was no trust and truth in your daily actions," she said.

June admitted, though, that Joe used to buy her chocolate on Valentine's Day.

"We used to exchange gifts, didn't we, dear? In fact, last year even he bought me some earrings, but I scolded him because we don't do that anymore. And I didn't have anything for him," she said.

"I got a kiss," Joe replied.

And that's all he wanted in return.



### Author Bio

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and an ardent proponent of Valentine's Day.*

