Excerpt from Draft Manuscript Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts! (4th ed) Susanne M. Alexander and Johanna Merritt Wu

**Courtship:**

**Perspectives to Consider**

If you feel a strong attraction and you have formed a solid friendship, you may choose to **create a committed, exclusive relationship with that person**. This is sometimes called “courting” This is a mutual and consultative choice, not where one of you pursues the other, as is sometimes portrayed in media, art, and literature. When courting, you are both becoming acquainted with the other’s character and considering whether marriage is a possibility and a wise potential choice.

**Courting might be thought of as dating taken to a more serious and committed level**, although this doesn’t imply you have to date first. In many cases, Baha’i couples have been friends and realize that they are ready to consider the possibility of marriage, without ever having followed dating customs of those around them. When courting, you have the specific intention of considering marriage, without a premarital sexual relationship or cohabitation. Courting offers a time for learning more about each other’s values, goals, character, and the fit between the two of you in each of these areas. It is a period in which you can build trust and strong communication skills, other qualities of friendship, and demonstrate your faithfulness and commitment to each other.

Courtship is a time to **assess how aligned you are for marriage**. You are a couple, something in addition to being two individuals. Your communications, movements, and activities will often intersect. You will consider and accommodate each other’s preferences, abilities, and limitations. You will consider your levels of activity, your energy levels and social activity preferences, and choices of how you spend your time in service to others. You will notice how well your personalities fit together and how you respond to difficulties. You will experiment with or talk about factors that would be relevant in marriage, such as how health, age, maturity, or experience are factors in being married, creating a home and life together, and in having or rearing children.

**Courting used to be common terminology**, but today, at least in much of the Western world, it is a practice that is rarely identified or utilized. Rather than being old-fashioned, this healthy and thoughtful approach to getting to know a potential marriage partner could revolutionize how new relationships are formed and how future marriages can better thrive. This transformative way of getting to know a potential marriage partner is different from the past, without ceremony, rules, obligations, and inequalities. It eliminates the former practice in which families oversaw all aspects of the relationship and union. It reverses practices where women were property or a tradeable good, instead ensuring that women have an equal voice in their marriage and future, as well as equal partners, equal communicators, and equal members. Courting allows time for you to get to know one another well as equals, better understanding each other’s character, without the distraction of dating others or engaging in sexual relations. It provides time and opportunities to build relationship skills that you’ll need in marriage. It helps you focus on establishing a long-term spiritual bond and firm foundation for your future together.

Courtship can potentially involve **family members** rather than the couple isolating themselves, as is often the case in current dating models. If you choose to, you can draw on your parents to consult with you during your courting, asking their advice and opinions. However, it is imperative that parents not interfere in the initial *selection* of a partner.

While their interference isn’t allowed, take care that you **do not avoid family interactions**, as this would be counter-productive to your marriage preparation process and understanding of each other’s character and fit. Spending time with your families will hopefully give you opportunities to build family unity, as well as to learn about family models, patterns, and expectations. You will see how you each behave and respond in those settings. It will be wise to pay attention to how your partner interacts with their parent who is the same gender as you, because sometimes those roles and interactions can carry over into marriage--therefore indicating how your partner might treat you in marriage. Of course, having this degree of comfortable interaction and opportunity for getting to know each other’s families is an ideal situation. If your parents or other family members are highly dysfunctional or even abusive, you will determine together how much contact to have with them.

**Courtship activities that help you observe and understand each other’s character, personality, attitudes, and behavior** will vary from couple to couple. For one couple, who are deeply immersed in the arts, a movie might provide an opportunity for an in-depth and lively discussion. For another couple, watching movies might be a way to hide their thoughts and emotions from each other and avoid communication. There are not necessarily different activities in courtship than you would do with friends or when dating, but your intention with them and the depth of knowledge you are seeking are different at this point. Remember to spend time with a variety of different people and in various circumstances. Being an exclusive *couple* does not mean that you spend all your time exclusively *alone,* without your friends, family, and community. Your other relationships should continue, and you will hopefully begin to build relationships with each other’s friends and community as a result.

Below is a sampling of **activities you may wish to try both alone as a couple and together with friends and family**. Each may deepen your relationship. Determine what works best for you and see what other ideas you can generate. As you participate in activities, pay attention and **assess your experiences**— what do you like or not like in the activity or in your interaction as a couple during the activity? What kinds of activities do you enjoy doing together? What activities do you prefer to do separately and why?

**Sharing Time**

* Take nature walks or stroll along a beach
* Visit art galleries or museums
* Share photographs you have taken of special moments and people
* Throw a party
* Watch television or movies
* Go shopping
* Study and discuss religious or spiritual materials
* Exercise at a fitness center or out in nature
* Play board games, cards, or electronic games
* Listen to music
* Take a class in and/or practice meditation or yoga
* Visit amusement parks
* Walk with or care for a pet
* Visit the library
* Pray together
* Take an educational class
* Spend time with friends
* Go dancing
* Spend time with family
* Attend a concert
* Listen to a musical group at a restaurant, coffeehouse, or nightclub
* Attend religious gatherings, worship services, conferences, workshops, or summer schools
* Do home/yard work and repairs
* Attend a sporting event
* Read a book aloud to each other
* Participate in a book club
* Do homework or study together
* Go out for tea, coffee, a meal, or dessert
* Have a picnic
* Go to or watch a movie or other media program
* Participate in a hobby-related event
* Go to a comedy club
* Participate in a Toastmasters International club (learn to give public talks)
* Attend an exhibition or show (boating, jewelry, health, home & garden....)
* Take a scenic drive or walk or ride

**Serving/Volunteering**

* Help someone with a home repair project
* Visit elders
* Plan a meeting or a conference
* Teach a children’s class
* Care for children
* Volunteer with a local civic organization
* Join or start a committee
* Plan and host a devotional/prayer meeting
* Facilitate a spiritual study class for junior youth, teens, or adults
* Participate with a neighborhood association
* Tutor after-school children

**Being Creative**

* Build or decorate
* Create an art project
* Share family recipes and try out new ones
* Write an article, story, poem, song, or book; participate in a creative writing workshop
* Plant and tend a garden
* Do a jigsaw puzzle
* Refinish furniture
* Make a movie
* Sing songs or play musical instruments; join a singing group
* Make clothing or jewelry
* Build sand or snow sculptures
* Write love letters or emails to each other
* Learn and practice a new language
* Design a website with graphics
* Take photos; frame them; create a screensaver
* Paint a portion of a home

**Enjoying Physical Activity/Adventure**

* Play cooperative games
* Go for a walk; fly a kite
* Ski cross-country or downhill
* Travel
* Play volleyball or other group sports
* Camp; Hike
* Go canoeing or rafting
* Climb hills or mountains
* Play tennis or other racquet sports
* Ride bikes or horses
* Rollerblade or ice skate
* Bowl
* Swim; Snorkel/scuba dive

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**Long Distant Relationships:** Of course, your activities together will be more limited if you are in a **long-distance relationship**. From a distance, you can ask each other focused questions, particularly ones that inform you about whether your partner is a good balance for you. When you are together in person, you can deepen your relationship and understand other facets of each other’s character and personality by seeing each other in action and assess whether what you have shared about your lives matches what you are observing. It is best to spend your visits doing activities that maximize getting to know each other. Choose a variety of situations, including those listed above—particularly ones in the "service” section.

Although getting to know a partner from a distance is not the same as being together in person, you *can* build a fruitful friendship and explore a potential future this way. In fact, **long-distance methods of communication** canallow you and your partner to get to know each other in ways that you might not if the two of you were together in the same place regularly. There may be less nervousness with communications that are not in person, which might help you get to know each other better. Through long conversations, texting, and email contact, you may learn more about some aspects of each other’s character qualities, choices, interests, previous experiences, current interests and activities, and where you see yourselves in the future. It may even be easier to be open and honest when you are in different localities. Note: Remember to stay in exploration mode – whether you’re in person or far apart. This will keep you open to whatever will be the best outcome for the two of you.

Despite some of the potential upsides, there are also some **cautions and pitfalls that are wise to consider with a long-distance relationship**. When you and your partner see one another infrequently, your times together can feel very intense, romantic, and almost “magical.” You may be able to show your “best” selves to each other for these brief periods, but if together for longer periods you may find that other more challenging parts of your personality will start to show. Remember that to sustain any relationship, it is essential to be honest about the “real you” rather than portray a “perfect” picture of yourself that is not the full picture. This is true in your other communications as well. You may actually have no effective way of knowing about each other’s behavior within a real-life context with just brief visits. The “real you” is more likely to be visible with repeated and prolonged face-to-face interactions, and they may only be seen with long visits or moving to the same area.

Additionally, the two of you may think that any problems that occur in your visits just stem from the stress of being apart. This assumption can falsely lead you to believe that being together in a more serious relationship or marriage will alleviate these difficulties and will solve such problems. When only spending short periods together you may end up together, but only to find out that neither of you really knows the other. Vigilance, honesty, prayer, meditation, and consultation with trusted others who can give you objective input about any problems that may be occurring and possibly about your readiness to marry. These can help prevent the pitfall of jumping into a relationship too quickly and with too little information.

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**Chastity:** Couples are to practice chastity, a character quality that includes living full lives and not being involved in sex outside of marriage. The wisdom of this law is multi-faceted and can help you more deeply recognize one another’s character without being blinded by a physical relationship. If your **commitment to chastity** and to living in alignment with Baha’u’llah’s guidance is strong and mutual, and the limits are clear to both of you, your agreement to honor them will help prevent problems from arising. These shared commitments and boundaries can make it easier to keep mutual desire from pushing you toward greater physical intimacy. The shared understanding can also help prevent your “giving in” to sexual passion for fear of offending the other or of losing the relationship. If you engage in sexual touch or intercourse, there could be unexpected and unwanted consequences, such as dejection, feeling out of alignment with your beliefs or the laws of your faith, pregnancy, infections/diseases, lack of ability to discern the character of the other because of now feeling committed to them, and/or guilt that can weigh down your heart and soul.

Be aware that sexual activity can often be **tempting when there are special occasions or visits with each other**. You may be feeling strong emotions and attraction, and sex may seem like a good way to celebrate. What spiritual practices, commitments, or physical restrictions do you need in place to help you maintain your connection to Baha’u’llah’s loving desire for your well-being and alignment with His teachings about chastity in these circumstances? These laws are guidance to free you, protect you and to allow you the most happiness over the long term. The short-term sacrifices are real, but the long-term gains are life-sustaining and can lead to more future stability.

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As you get to know each other, pay close attention to what you **most appreciate in one another’s character**. Carefully note **anything that concerns you about one another’s character** as well. **Do not brush these concerns aside or deny that they are important**. You may find that some areas of concern can be prayed about, consulted about, and resolved. Other issues may cause you to decide to stop moving toward marriage with each other. You may also find that your own character needs refinement and growth and that you haven't grown the qualities of honesty, flexibility, or wisdom that you will need before you marry. Being open and aware of your and your potential partner's weaknesses is an important step to knowing if you can overcome them--and whether they are impediments to a successful marriage. Everyone has failings and everyone needs growth, but there are some aspects of character and behavior that may prove insurmountable in the journey toward a healthy relationship if not dealt with before the marriage takes place.

No one is perfect, but you certainly want to find someone who is "perfect for you"-- someone you can grow and develop with and whose imperfections you can handle.

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**There is no set length of time for courtship.** Consult with one another about how to manage *the balance* between taking enough time to ensure you know each other thoroughly and avoiding an excessive length of time dating and courting before marriage. You may need to consult openly about fears of commitment or failure, if these arise and hold you back. When you are certain you want to marry and you are confident of your ability to create and sustain a strong marriage union, you will then be ready to move forward to approach your parents for consent to marry.

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