

Late in Life Love

Two years ago, my husband, Rich, and I, signed up for a special cruise to the Mexican Riviera.

Each night, we rotated to a new set of dinner mates, and one night we were joined by Harry and Donna, who quickly let us know that they were “happy partners” at their retirement home. Harry was 90 and Donna was 87, and they had been living together for two years.

During the cruise, we shared several conversations, and after we came home we continued to share phone conversations and letters. I want to tell their story because like Harry and Donna, Rich and I are late-in-life loves.

Donna moved into a retirement home with her husband in February 2001. She had taught fifth and sixth grade children with learning disabilities in California until her retirement. A couple months after they moved into the retirement home, her husband of 59 years died. Donna shared her thoughts with us: “I feel sorry for people who are as lonesome as I was, especially after being in a happy marriage.”

Harry moved into the retirement home with his wife, in March, 2002. Harry was in the Navy from 1935 through 1945. Later he worked in a naval shipyard as a diver and supervisor. His wife, Katherine, and Donna became friends, and they shared the dinner table with Harry and two other women. Katherine died in August 2005, ending a 64-year loving relationship. The other two table mates died a short time after. When they were alone at the table, Donna and Harry began talking more with each other. They soon discovered they were both passionate liberals and as they shared more conversations and time together, they discovered they were falling in love.

They began taking trips together in Harry’s motor home. Donna smiled as she recalled how they would sneak away together with the help of her daughter who would slip a suitcase into Harry’s motor home as the two lovebirds were leaving to go off on a trip.

When Donna and Harry realized they were in love and wanted to live together, they asked the management of their retirement home if this would be possible. The manager agreed, and they moved in together. They would have married, but after lengthy marriages that produced two children each, eight grandchildren, and three great grandchildren, they decided it would create too many complications for their families if they married. Harry added, “All of the children approve of our relationship and are really happy for us.”

So, they are living together, with all of the elements of marriage, except for a piece of paper.

When we first shared a dinner with Harry and Donna, I noticed that they were frequently holding hands. I asked Donna, “Do you cuddle much?” She shot back quickly, “All the time.” And, she added, “We got caught smooching once in the entrance lobby.”

I suggested to Donna that it must have been very difficult for her after the death of her husband. She agreed with me. Then, her expression changed from a sad face to a broad smile, and she said, “I didn’t think I could fall in love again at my age.”

I have thought a lot about Harry and Donna since our meeting. And, I keep noticing similar late-in-life love stories...particularly when I tell people that Rich and I are late-in-life loves.

After meeting, falling in love with, and then marrying Rich when I was 62, I said to my friends: “I’m the poster girl for it’s never too late.” Then I began meeting others who had met and married in their 40’s, 50’s and 60’s. Like Harry and Donna, the couples all seemed to share the same basic story: they were best friends; spent a lot of time together; were very romantic; didn’t sweat the small stuff; were far more accepting of their differences rather than trying to change the other person.

After spending time with Harry and Donna, even I marveled at the idea that late-in-life love happens beyond the 60’s. I also remembered that when I was a little girl, my great grandfather who was 98 and living in a retirement home, married his 95 year-old sweetheart whom he had met there.

I believe that a great love relationship is wonderful and amazing at whatever age it happens. Although I haven’t seen any statistics, it seems to me that I am encountering more people who found the love of their life in their later years.

When Rich and I were first dating most people we met thought we had been married for several years. This also seems to be the pattern of many of the couples I have met on Whidbey who seem so well matched and comfortable together that I have been surprised to learn they have been married for only 5 or 10 years.

I do think there are similar themes that Rich and I share with these other couples: We have a sense of spiritual connection, of there being a greater intention that brought us into each others lives; we see our relationship as both a healing experience and a learning experience.

What is true for Rich and me are the most common characteristics for the late-in-life love partners I know: We place enormous value on our relationship; we often feel a sense of youth and playfulness when we are together; and we have a commitment to be with our partner forever.

Recently, Rich and I were flying home from a vacation. Just as the flight attendant stopped by to get our beverage request, Rich and I shared a kiss. “Are you two newlyweds,” she asked. Without a second to think, I responded “Always.”