



Opposites Attract

Ignore the skeptics. Marrying outside of your social class is no big deal.

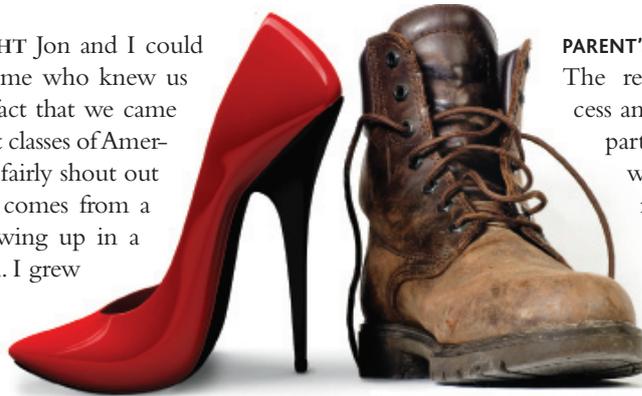
NOBODY THOUGHT Jon and I could stay married. Some who knew us trumpeted the fact that we came from completely different classes of American society. They would fairly shout out the odds against us. He comes from a modest background growing up in a working-class small town. I grew up in the big city, enjoying a life of privilege and family wealth. As a young girl, I pretended to be a stewardess on my father's private company jet. Jon didn't fly in a jet until he had finished college.

He has always been a responsible, hard worker, but ambition was never part of the mix. I was an ambitious, creative risk taker, bouncing from one project to the next. I was told that our backgrounds were too different, our values too different, and that we were guaranteed to fail.

But through a long friendship first, and then dating, we discovered that in spite of our different class backgrounds, we did have core values in common. By the time our dating turned into an engagement, we were well aware of the chorus of naysayers around us. But Jon told me simply, "If we want this relationship, we can have it." On the most basic level, it really is that simple.

Just about everyone marries up or down—usually some of each, if you look at it broadly. Arriving from different social classes does not doom a relationship. Class is essentially background and experience that can be shared to foster and strengthen relationships. As it turns out, there is a balance in our marriage. What I gained in stability from him, he gained in a broader outlook on life from me. In addition to his day job, Jon has his own business, which he is free to work on either more or less. In my business, a highly creative endeavor, Jon offers encouragement and perspective when I slam up against a crushing roadblock. We use our experiential differences, which provide each of us with unique strengths, as support for one another.

The main message is: If you want this marriage, you can have it. You can have a merit-based choice of spouse who shares core values, rather than a class-based choice founded merely on assumptions.



PARENT'S GRIEF

The relationship between marital success and social station is a sensitive topic, particularly among parents; not many want to be seen as politically incorrect, or worse, naive.

But what exactly is so upsetting about seeing one's child marry across class lines? Some fear incompatibility of values, yet in America, such fear is unfounded; more often than

not, values do not differ between classes. Other traditional distinctions blur in our egalitarian nation. What about manners? Proper manners show that an individual has been taught the rules and knows how to follow them. All classes follow rules, and in the upper class the rules are well defined unless you care to be labeled eccentric or an outsider. Years ago, education and wealth were indicators of class, but no longer. Anyone can get an education, and financial markers such as large homes and flashy cars are now broadly available on easy credit terms. In short, traditional parental concerns based in fear of "the other" are, in many cases, unfounded.

I once helped a client who was very much in love with a firefighter, but whose parents disapproved of the relationship. My client never wavered in wanting to marry her man. I helped the two of them explore and understand the potential difficulties. The biggest challenge lay in finding a proper perspective on my client's wealth. This required creative thinking, because class rules—and gender expectations—in this area are hardest on a wealthy woman and a man of modest means. My client and her firefighter married and thrived. Both stretched and adjusted, but what marriage doesn't call for flexibility?

I have seen it time and again. If both partners cultivate focus and commitment, if you have values in common, then social status becomes irrelevant. Make no mistake: It requires work and commitment. But then all marriages do. So ignore the skeptics, even if they happen to be your parents. If you want this marriage, you can have it. ▣

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