

## Shelly Chose Me

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The choices we make in life – even at a young age – can determine the trajectory and quality of our life as it unfolds: How much and what kind of education? What career to pursue? Where to live? Whom to befriend? Whether to play sports or join the Armed Forces? Arguably, the most important choice, and the one that often plays the greatest role in the ongoing drama of our life, is the choice of a mate. Our happiness, our success, our material well-being, even our health can depend enormously on how well we select a person with whom to share our life.

As I've said numerous times in these pages, my choice of Shelly was foreordained from the first moment I laid eyes on her in 1958. More importantly, in 1960, Shelly chose me. We were married in 1964, but from the fall of 1960 on, we both knew that we would be together for the rest of our lives.

How did these mutual choices come to pass? For me, it was a relatively simple process. At our initial meeting, I was totally smitten. I felt a powerful sense of attraction far beyond anything I had ever experienced. I had an overwhelming desire to be near this girl, to touch her, speak with her, bond with her. Incredibly, I was 15 years old; Shelly was 14. I did not see her again for nearly a year.

Upon our second meeting, the same urgent yearnings re-emerged in me. We dated for a year. For the most part, I kept my powerful emotions to myself for fear of spooking her and scaring her off. But over the course of that year – heaven be praised – Shelly fell in love with me. We were then separated for several months, during which time we wrote letters (nearly every day) in which we professed our mutual love. (I have those letters; re-reading them is almost too poignant to bear.) Upon re-uniting, we pledged our undying love and committed to marry when we were of the appropriate age (which turned out to be four years hence). It was at that moment that Shelly chose me. I had chosen her more than a year earlier.

So what was going on in our heads – in addition to our hearts, of course – as we made those choices? Was there a review of a pro and con sheet? Was it rational or emotional? Was it definitely to be permanent, or only temporary? Was it well-informed or impetuous? Was it realistic or idealistic?

Well, although there are a lot of similarities in the answers to those questions for each of us, I think there were also a few significant differences. In my case, the initial and lasting emotionally powerful attraction was paramount. My desire to be "with her" was compelling. But after a year together, my emotional feelings were complemented by a recognition that my heart had chosen wisely. It was impossible not to see the kindness, compassion and goodness of Shelly's

innate character. Moreover, she was also clearly very smart, highly disciplined and extraordinarily competent. At age 17 she was head of household; skillfully and affectionately caring for her fatally ill mom; taking care of her elder, disabled brother; and also unfailingly considerate of my desires and opinions in our budding love affair.

This was a no-brainer for me. The powerful emotional attraction was supplemented by an objective recognition of the stellar human qualities possessed by the beautiful creature I had fallen in love with. I recall thinking repeatedly about how lucky I was that Shelly loved me too and wanted to share her life with me. In retrospect, and especially since she died, I believe that I didn't appreciate to the degree I should have how extraordinarily fortunate I was that Shelly chose me.

But I believe the process of her choice was somewhat different from mine. Yes, it certainly began with physical attraction. I remember in those early days how affectionate Shelly was and how, no matter how much attention I paid her and how much adoration I showered upon her, she always wanted more.

However, I think when she examined my character, she did not find the same flawless creature that I found when I examined hers. Both of us had difficult childhoods. Shelly's included: poverty; immigrant and poorly acclimated parents who had a very bad marriage; a partially disabled brother who was a burden on the entire family; a crummy neighborhood with many features and characters that could lead to poor choices; and parents who barely spoke English. But in fact, her mother had a loving and sweet nature, and she passed it on to her daughter. My youth was also marred by difficulties: my father "knocked up" my mother after Pearl Harbor; my mother taunted me with the story that at the abortionist's door, her mother stopped her at the last instant from killing me; my father didn't return from the army overseas until I was two and a half years old – after which we lived poorly and under the rubric of a bad marriage. However, neither of my parents enjoyed the sweet disposition of Shelly's mom, and so no innate goodness was transmuted my way.

Let me just say that certain character flaws emerged in my youth: anxiety at my inability to control events, undirected anger, impatience and a tendency toward narcissism. I didn't recognize them. Shelly did. And yet, she chose me. Now, I don't want to overstate the case. I'm not really a bad guy. I have many redeeming qualities: honesty, book smarts, self-confidence, competence, ambition, devotion, steadfastness and maybe some others. The point is: I chose a nearly perfect partner, while Shelly's choice had a few significant warts. (I said nearly because Shelly actually had two flaws – she was a bit stubborn like her father, and she was occasionally intolerant. No one is perfect, although my beloved wife came pretty close.)

Why did she choose me if she saw that she was landing a less than perfect specimen? And how am I equipped to answer that question from a distance of more than half a century?

One could argue that she cold-bloodedly assayed that the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages and that who knew whether another better specimen would turn up. I think there is some truth to the former. I believe a clue is found in an event that occurred in the spring of 1961. Upon the advice of my mother, I bought Shelly a completely inappropriate 17<sup>th</sup> birthday present. Shelly was disappointed and momentarily questioned her choice of a mate. She consulted her mother – who encouraged her to look past the mistake. She told Shelly that "Ronnie loved you deeply, that he would make a good husband and father, that he would be successful and would provide you with a happy and prosperous life, that – in spite of some unfortunate personality traits – he would be good to you, solicitous of your needs and attentive to the loving relationship you had established and that he always would be so." God, am I grateful to that woman! Shelly heeded her mother's advice and from that day until another day 50 years later (see below), Shelly stayed true to that path.

Because she loved me, and because we had established a deeply loving and mutually respectful and supportive relationship, Shelly decided that that she would not let a few, relatively minor character flaws prevent a lifetime together filled with love, companionship, family happiness and material success. I don't think I fully understood what was going on in her head, but I believe I sensed that Shelly had decided to ignore some stuff. To paraphrase Lou Gehrig, at that moment, I considered myself the luckiest man on the face of the Earth. And then I didn't think about it for fifty years.

Until I retired in 2010. At that point, Shelly decided – since we were going to be physically together virtually 24/7 – that I needed to finally understand. She dragged me to a therapist. Together, we saw a marvelous psychiatrist for about 15 months, who – with insight, partially gleaned from private conversations with Shelly – patiently enlightened me about the nature of my youth, how it affected my personality, and what could be done to overcome my fears and flaws. Shelly was very pleased with the result and at the time of my "graduation," she chose me once again.

Shelly and I were very happy in the ensuing years. She took great pleasure in her children and grandchildren, from a few close friends, from her wonderful mountain abode in Western Maryland (which she loved and in which she created a spectacularly beautiful environment), from her quilting enterprise (described elsewhere in these pages), and from her husband – who was not only as devoted to her as ever, but also "cured" of several maladies that Shelly had recognized half a century earlier but about which she patiently waited a lifetime to confront. I am eternally grateful that Shelly chose me – when she was 17 and again when she was 67. It is a cruel and unimaginable injustice that she was taken from me, from her progeny, from her

friends at the age of 71. All of us were fortunate to have had her in our lives. And me – I was unbelievably lucky that Shelly chose me.