



Another Path to True Love

A local writer suggests embracing the world as your soul mate.
By Joey Garcia

SOME POETS SPEAK OF MARRIAGE IN THREE WAYS. There is the passion for work that is the marriage to career, the affection for another that becomes a bond between two people, and the internal marriage of the ego and the soul embodied in the lives of saints and mystics. It is the last marriage that most interests me because I think it leads to a marriage that we most often resist and rarely speak of: becoming a soul mate to the world.

Like many other 40-something divorced singles, I have trolled the Internet for potential dates, been blindsided into blind dates by well-meaning friends and danced off the cheap hors d'oeuvres at much-publicized singles parties. I've fallen in love and out of infatuation, been unhappily married and amicably divorced. All this in search of the soul mate promised by legend and religion. But throughout the past six years, a series of strange synchronicities led me to believe that, sometimes, the yearning for a soul mate is simply a call to a love more expansive than can be matched by one person.

My invitation out of the search for *eros* (the Greek word for the romantic love of soul mates) and into *agape* (the Greek term for spiritual love) arrived a few years after my divorce. I was seized one day, for no apparent reason, with the idea that I should seek a church annulment of my marriage. The impetus wasn't my Catholic upbringing or my fairly new position as a theology teacher at St. Francis High School. I felt the pull from deep within me. I could have chosen to dismiss it, but the feeling was so intense that I followed.

The meeting with Father Anthony, my parish priest, was uneventful at first. He sat across from me in a cluttered rectory office taking notes on a new legal pad. After firing a few questions, Father Anthony assessed my marriage as "without form." Translation: I did not marry in the church and did not marry another Catholic, so my marriage was not a sacrament. That made it eligible for annulment. There was one problem, though. My baptismal certificate was necessary to complete the paperwork required by the church tribunal.

I was born and baptized in Belize, a tiny, peaceful country in Central America that is harassed by hurricanes and, occasionally, the Guatemalan military. The taproot of my family tree extends as far back as the country's ancient Mayan culture, through the arrival of Africans freed from slavery, to the years that Belize was a British colony, into its recent independence and the striking poverty that plagues it today. But devastating hurricanes convinced my parents to emigrate to California when I was a toddler. My baptismal certificate was just one of many family keepsakes devoured by the terrible winds.

I had only traveled back to Belize three times in my life, all as an adult. On each trip, I felt like a tourist, but I longed to know my native land more intimately.

Still, I vacillated about spending \$700 for plane fare to Belize to secure this certificate.

Then my father called. He had inherited some land in Belize. Would I be willing to check on it for him? He would help me out with the ticket cost. I knew it was a sign. (I had told no one in my family that I intended to apply for an annulment.)

A day or so after my arrival in Belize City, my cousin, Cynthia, and I walked the three miles from her home to the church where I was baptized. We hurried past the stench of the open sewage canal teeming with catfish that would become dinner for those hungry enough. We passed through streets lined with mom-and-pop shops and restaurants, over the bridge near the water taxi to Holy Redeemer Cathedral. As we waited for Bishop Dorick Wright to arrive and sign my baptismal certificate, we greeted those entering the rectory office to receive free bags of rice and beans or to ask for other assistance.

Eventually, Bishop Wright, a tall, black man with neatly cropped white hair, entered. Although he had a serious countenance and a beard like an Old Testament prophet, he was known for his wickedly witty sense of humor. Cynthia introduced us and, after a pleasant chat, I shook his hand goodbye. Then I startled myself by blurting out, "If there is ever anything I can do for you, please let me know."

It was more than a polite request. The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr writes that when we say "I love you," it's as if we have dropped our pants and are standing naked and vulnerable before the world. And in that moment, that's how I felt. A part of me wished that the bishop would simply ask for a box of chocolates or a book. But I knew that this moment held much more. Somehow, so did Bishop Wright.

A slow smile spread across his face. "You can organize a teachers conference for me," he said. He explained that most elementary school teachers in Belize have only a high school education, so they lack creative teaching strategies. Many teachers resort to rote memorization, which does not inspire a student's critical or creative thinking skills.

More than half of the 360,000 people in Belize are younger than 18 years old, giving the country one of the youngest populations worldwide. All education is tuition-based; poverty is persistent and widespread. So only 50 percent of the children in Belize have families who can afford to send them to school. Of the children who do attend, about 30 percent complete primary school and 20 percent continue on to high school. Three percent attend college. If we could help the teachers, the bishop reasoned, we could help the children, too.

My cousin and I looked at each other, astonished. I immediately pushed the bishop's request to the back of my mind; it was simply too extravagant. "Putting

together a teachers conference is a full-time job," I protested to Cynthia on the walk home.

"Fu troo, gyal," she said in Creole, the native language of Belize. "Dat krayzi!"

Two years later, I sat down to write New Year's resolutions and decided to complete tasks left bubbling on the back burner of my life. I e-mailed the bishop: I was ready to volunteer. Months passed without a response. I was relieved, actually. Then my dear Aunt Helen, Cynthia's mother, died. At the funeral service in Belize

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City, I noticed Bishop Wright in the pew in front of me. I tapped on his shoulder and launched into an excuse-laden explanation for my two-year silence. I ended by mentioning the e-mail. "I don't use e-mail," he said, and suggested that we meet with the principal of a local school the next day.

The meeting lasted less than an hour. "OK, I can set this up for August," I said, standing to leave. The principal frowned. "August is too late," she said. "The conference must occur in June."

"June!" I said. "That's two months away! How can I raise money and find two volunteer teachers to staff the training in two months? I work full time."

The bishop laughed. "You're an American. You can do it."





Psychologist and best-selling author M. Scott Peck once defined love as the ability to extend oneself for the benefit or growth of another. I knew that when a task, like the bishop's request, seemed too big, it was a call to extend myself beyond the limits of my imagined capabilities. So I pushed myself forward for the benefit of Belize and my own personal growth.

Back in Sacramento, I reached out to my network of friends. Within two weeks, I met two local educators willing to facilitate the June training for Belizean teachers. I quickly organized a fundraiser to cover costs of our trip and the training.

Lynn Hester, one of the teachers from that original service trip to Belize, now counts the teacher training program as one of her passions. She guides our new teacher volunteers into producing successful academic training programs. With her skills, and support from countless others, I started the nonprofit Rise Up Belize! Advancement through Education to formalize our efforts to improve the education system of my tiny Caribbean homeland.

Since 2004, Rise Up Belize! has provided free professional development training in math, science and language arts for nearly 200 Belizean primary school teachers. Last year, we added free academic camps for nearly 100 children during Easter and summer breaks. We also offered a Reading Challenge Program designed by the Sacramento Area Reading Association for 40 additional kids. Every child with perfect attendance and participation in one of our academic camps scores a free backpack stuffed with school supplies.

Giving in exchange for good work teaches a valuable lesson, as Muhammed Yunus, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for the micro-credit miracles of his Grameen Bank, notes. "Charity is not an answer to poverty. It only helps poverty to continue. It creates dependency and takes away an individual's initiative to break through the wall of poverty. Unleashing of energy and creativity in each human being is the answer to poverty."

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It is also the answer to those, like myself, whose impoverished imaginations defined soul mate in limited human terms. The clearest message about my own transformation arrived in a dream. I had been traveling in southern Belize, scouting new locations for future teacher trainings and academic camps. The poverty was excruciating and I would have expected those images to haunt me. Instead, as I was crossing the bridge from asleep to awake, the envelope of a dream fully opened. I heard a voice say, "I am married to Belize." And I knew that I did completely accept the challenges and joys of that relationship, until death do us part.

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