Watching the Couples Go By
Why is this basic woman so valuable to this basic man whose arm she holds?

By Herbert Stein
Updated Sunday, June 18, 2006, at 8:16 PM ET

One of my persistent fantasies used to be of sitting at a sidewalk table at a cafe in Paris. I would be writing with my pen (la plume de ma tante) in a notebook (un cahier) while smoking a Gauloise. I would not be writing economics. One cannot write economics while sitting at a sidewalk cafe. Maybe that is why there have been so few distinguished French economists. I would be writing a novel, or perhaps poetry, or even a philosophical treatise. But I would frequently raise my eyes to watch the girls (les filles) go by.

I no longer have that fantasy. I do, however, eat from time to time at an outdoor table in front of a small restaurant on the street leading to the Kennedy Center. I don't try to write there. I can't write with la plume de ma tante. I am addicted to the word processor. I suppose I could use a laptop computer. But that mechanism would destroy the romantic illusion. Instead, I watch the passers-by.

I am not concentrating on the girls. I am concentrating on the married couples. How do I know that those men and women walking two-by-two up to the Kennedy Center are married to each other? Well, 75 percent of all men between the ages of 30 and 75 are married, so if you see a man in that age group walking with a woman to the Kennedy Center—which is not exactly Club Med—it's a good bet that the two are married, and almost certainly to each other.

I look particularly at the women in those couples. They are not glamorous. There are no Marlene Dietrichs, Marilyn Monroes, or Vivien Leighs among them. (It is a sign of my age that I can't think of the name of a single living glamorous movie actress.) Some of them are pretty, but many would be considered plain. Since they are on their way to the Kennedy Center—perhaps to attend a play, an opera, or a concert, one may assume that they are somewhat above average in cultural literacy. But in other respects one must assume that they are, like most people, average.

Continue Article →
But to the man whose hand or arm she is holding, she is not "average." She is the whole world to him. They may argue occasionally, or even frequently. He may have an eye for the cute intern in his office. But that is superficial. Fundamentally, she is the most valuable thing in his life.

Genesis says, "And the Lord God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him.' " And so, "made He a woman." It doesn't say that He made a pretty woman, or a witty woman, or an any-kind-of-adjective woman. He made the basic woman.

Why is this basic woman so valuable to the man whose hand or arm she is holding as I see them making their way up to the Kennedy Center? I think there are three simple things.

First, she is a warm body in bed. I don't refer to their sexual activity. That is important but too varied for me to generalize about. I refer to something that is, if possible, even more primitive. It is human contact.

A baby crying in its crib doesn't want conversation or a gold ring. He wants to be picked up, held, and patted. Adults need that physical contact also. They need to cuddle together for warmth and comfort in an indifferent or cold world. At least, they need to be able to do that. The plain woman and plain man I am watching do that for each other.

But conversation is also important. These couples may have been talking to each other for 30 years or more. You might think they have nothing left to say. But still they can talk to each other in ways that they cannot talk to anyone else. He can tell her of something good he has done, or something good that has happened to him, without fearing that she will think he is bragging. He can tell her of something bad that has happened without fearing that she will think he is complaining. He can tell her of the most trivial thing without fearing that she will think he is bothering her. He can count on her interest and understanding.

The primary purpose of this conversation is not to convey any specific information. Its primary purpose is to say, "I am here and I know that you are here."

Third, the woman serves the man's need to be needed. If no one needs you, what good are you, and what are you here for? Other people—employers, students, readers—may say that they need you. But it isn't true. In all such relationships you are replaceable at some price. But to this woman you are not replaceable at any price. And that gives you the self-esteem to go out and meet the world every day.

So this "ordinary" woman—one like about 50 million others in America—has this great value to this man she is going to the theater with. He surely does not make a calculation—doesn't mark her to market. He probably never says how much he values her, to himself or to her. But he acts as if he knows it.

I see that I have written these views entirely from the point of view of the man. That is only natural for me. But I don't for a minute think that the relationship I have been trying to describe is
Watching the couples go by. By Herbert Stein

one-sided. On the contrary, I am sure it is reciprocal.

I can hear you saying: “How do you know all this? You are only an economist, practitioner of the dismal science. You aren’t Ann Landers.” That is all true. But my wife and I walked up that hill to the Kennedy Center many times.

Herbert Stein was a contributor to Slate and author of the Dear Prudence advice column. He was chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under Presidents Nixon and Ford and a member of the board of contributors at the Wall Street Journal. He died in 1999.