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OnLove: Psychologist-author Robert Epstein says love isn't accidental

By Ellen McCarthy
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Robert Epstein believes that someday, in the not-too-distant future, many Americans will share his philosophy on relationships. And his philosophy is this: You can build love deliberately and choose whom to do it with.

All of this "falling" stuff, he thinks, will become passé.

Epstein is a psychologist and author whose previous research has focused largely on creativity and adolescence. He turned his attention to affairs of the heart after his first marriage ended in divorce. "It was personal," he says. "I've certainly failed in relationships and in very much the typical American way, which makes it very frustrating -- when you fail in a typical way."

In 2002, when a young woman came in to interview for an internship and told him she'd never been in love, he had an idea: They set out to make her fall in love. The intern eventually backed out of the experiment, so Epstein decided to do it himself. After meeting a woman on a plane who agreed to be his partner in the endeavor, he began to employ strategies and behaviors that relationship experts have found increase feelings of intimacy: sharing vulnerabilities, touching each other affectionately and seeking adventures together.

The good news? They fell in love. The bad? It didn't last. She was from Venezuela, and the logistics were too difficult to overcome.

Still, Epstein, former editor of *Psychology Today*, has been shaping his theory that love can be orchestrated ever since. It may sound strange to Western ears, he realizes. But Epstein's come to think it's the American way that's really absurd when it comes to love: "We grow up on fairy tales and movies in which magical forces help people find their soul mates, with whom they effortlessly live happily ever after," he wrote in a recent issue of *Scientific American Mind*. "The fairy tales leave us powerless, putting our love lives into the hands of the Fates."

To gain insights into another way of cultivating love, Epstein has begun to study arranged marriages. Some studies have found that over time the affection between partners in arranged marriages can surpass that of couples who chose each other because of love.

Epstein, 56 and remarried, taught a course at the University of California at San Diego last spring in which students could earn extra credit by employing affection-building exercises with friends and strangers after class. Almost all the students who tried the techniques -- including trust falls, synchronized breathing and prolonged gazing -- reported greater feelings of closeness with their partners. (The psychologist has sworn off talking about his own relationship, but he will say his wife sat in on several classes that semester.)

The seed Epstein is hoping to plant in people's minds, through lectures and a book he's writing, is that we may have greater control than we think over this wily thing called love.

And if that doesn't sound particularly romantic?

"All I can say is there's nothing romantic about failure," Epstein answers.

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