

# DECIDING TO LEAVE

## (or not to leave) **A LOVE AFFAIR**

How to know what you really want, and need, from your man  
by Bette-Jane Raphael



Right now, a friend of mine has a decision to make that may well affect the rest of her life. She's been trying to make up her mind for months, and every time I see her I inquire about her progress. If I am more than casually interested in her decision, it's because I once had to make a similar choice: whether or not to walk away from a man I loved—one who, moreover, loved me back—because he could not give me all that I wanted from a relationship.

My friend has been seeing this man for two years. They have been good for each other in a lot of ways, but she wants to marry and have children. Her lover isn't ready for those commitments, and he can't promise that he ever will be. He knows how she feels (she's told him often enough), and he's willing to live with her and share a life with her. But more he will not do.

Should she accept his terms, knowing that it's a big, lonely world out there and that she does, in fact, care for him? Or should she cut her losses, take her courage and her heart in her hands and go after what she really wants?

It's a decision no one can make for her. No one could make it for me. The scales that weigh the evidence of each case are buried deep within, and, in the long run, facts weigh less heavily than intangibles.

Five years ago, I decided to leave a two-year relationship I felt was going nowhere. At the time I was carrying my life around in shopping bags, half living with my lover, but keeping my own apartment so that he could have his privacy when he wanted it. I was spending weekends with him, never knowing from weekday to weekday where I would be sleeping. My emotional resources were completely tied up in the relationship; I was without the energy (that my lover

seemed to possess) for other attachments.

This was not my idea of heaven. I wanted a settled existence. I wanted to sleep in the same bed every night and be able to plan my life a few weeks in advance, in concert with the same person. My lover knew what I wanted, but felt he was in another place. Recently freed from a distasteful marriage, the thought of turning his bachelor apartment into a real-life household filled him with terror.

I looked at things as clearly as I could, given the fact that I was cockeyed in love with him. Looking back on my life, I figured out that it takes me an average of two years to fall in love again after a breakup. I further calculated, with reasonable optimism, that it takes a year of seeing each other before two people might be ready to actually make a life together. With that timetable in mind, I reasoned that spending another year or two in this relationship would make my chances of ever having a family iffy at best. I simply had no more time to give to a connection that was heading nowhere. I understood that my lover wasn't in the same place I was, but I couldn't wait for him to find his way there, especially when I had no assurances that he was really up for the trip. No, I decided, I should be the one to travel.

I have never regretted my decision, although I had months of grieving for the relationship. I eventually found that making the choice had put *me* back at the center of my own life. (This spot had been occupied for too long by my lover.) I finally realized that I had been trying to get from him what I could only get from myself.

I believe that it is vitally important for women in unsatisfying relationships to make conscious choices, rather than continue like children who don't have control over their lives. (Continued)



I am reminded of a friend of a friend, a woman in love with a man who asked her to marry him, but who then retreated in fear, rescinding all offers of commitment. This woman has since turned down an attractive job offer because it meant moving away from her lover. She's given up thoughts of finding her own apartment, preferring to stay in her parents' home. She's put her life on hold, waiting for her lover to again offer her a larger place in *his*.

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I've heard too many of these stories. I've seen too many affairs go on without the unhappy participant's ever coming to grips with the choice that she must make. Instead, she goes on, hoping she will eventually get what she wants, blaming her lover if she doesn't, and ultimately blaming herself for wasting perhaps years of her life.

Making such a decision is no piece of cake, especially when you're in love and your judgment is clouded by desire. The first step in this difficult process is finding out what you *really* want. New York therapist Nancy Purcell offers this suggestion: "When the bottom line is approached, you have to find out whether there are relationship difficulties, or whether there's a basic mismatching—a difference in the way you and your partner want to live your lives and express intimacy."

Purcell cautions that often a woman may say she wants to get married or have a baby, when what she's really expressing is a question about commitment. Before making a decision about the relationship, ask yourself: "What am I really pushing for here? What's really missing for me?" When you have a

clear idea of the answer, you should know exactly what you want, and whether *that* is something your partner can provide you. Not knowing wastes a lot of time.

I'm reminded of a friend who spent six years with a man who never revealed his emotional side to her, and who seemed equally uninterested in having my friend reveal hers to him. When they finally broke up, it was ostensibly over his inability to commit himself to marriage, but in retrospect, my friend admits that what she really needed from him was communication on a deeper level than he was capable of reaching.

When you're sure where you want the relationship to go, the next thing to find out is whether it's actually going there. Evaluating the relationship shouldn't have anything to do with artificial time limits (in two years we should be living together, etc.). Unlike railroads, relationships don't run on timetables, and in this case, time is less important than distance. Is the relationship progressing? What's relevant is not how long it has been going on, but has it been going *anywhere*?

There are ways to tell. Do you spend more time with each other now than you used to? Are you about to do something together that you've never done before, such as taking a trip, making a big joint purchase, planning a long-range project? Are your friends becoming more integrated, and your social plans being made further in advance? Compare the relationship as it was a year ago with the situation today. Is it substantially different, or suspiciously the same?

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If you're not happy with the present situation, is your partner open to the possibility of change? Is he unwilling to even talk about it? It's one thing if he says he can't make promises, and quite another if he declares any

change in your situation a closed subject. That's scared bully talk. It also seems to imply a deeper problem than a mere ambivalence toward commitment.

How unhappy are *you*? Intermittently? Or unrelievedly? Does your unhappiness taint even good times—say, when you are both on vacation? If so, you might have to face the fact that what you want may be more important to you than what you have. In that case, nothing short of real change will suffice.

Asking yourself these questions should provide much of the vital evidence you need to make a decision about the relationship. That evidence, plus the tide of your emotions, should carry you to the right shore. But you must be selfish in making your choice. What your partner wants, and what you want *from* him, can play no part. The relevant question is: What do you want for *yourself*? If you decide to leave, it must be because you honestly feel that will help you find what you want—and not because you hope to manipulate your partner into *giving* you what you want. If you decide to stay, the reasons should be the same.

We all know of women who hang in there for what seems like eternity and do eventually, to everyone's surprise, end up married to the guys they hang around for. What we don't know is the price they pay along the way, and whether the marriage itself is worth the price.

Several months after I left the relationship in question, my lover decided that he wanted to meet me halfway—he was willing to live with me, if not marry me. That was enough for me, and I've never regretted our coming together again. He doesn't have the privacy he wanted, and I don't have a marriage license. We do have each other.

We are all answerable for our own happiness. We can't expect our partners, or anyone else, to drop it into our laps. Gaining that happiness involves making choices, taking control of our lives, not handing control over to chance, dreams or a man who doesn't know what to do with it—and whose responsibility, in any case, it is not. ■

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*Bette-Jane Raphael is the author of Can This Be Love? (Arbor House).*