To "Date" or Not to "Date"

(One missionary's perspective on cross-cultural relationships, 1996)

I'm a 32-year old single missionary lady who has lived in the Philippines for ten years now. I have had ministries both in church planting and teaching and have also been involved in the orientation and training of missionaries new to this country. Over the years, I have observed that one of the greatest challenges facing many single missionary women is knowing how to relate to the Filipino male. I don't have all the answers by any means, but I recently went through an experience that has given me some new glimpses into opposite-sex relationships across cultures. I would like to share some of my insights with you, reminding you that this is just one person's perspective and experience and others have had experiences very different from mine.

Let me begin at the beginning. I arrived in the Philippines when I was 21 years of age, straight out of Bible College. One of the first difficulties I encountered was knowing how to deal with acquaintances trying to match me up with their friend or brother or son or grandson! I also found it difficult to know how to answer the question "Would you marry a Filipino?" (I've discovered since that the easiest way to answer the question is "If it's the Lord's will." It's a truthful answer and doesn't create the problems that a straightforward "yes" or "no" answer could.) The hardest thing, though, was knowing how to act toward men -- how to avoid being too friendly without causing offense or appearing to be snobbish. Over the years, I feel I have adjusted quite well and rarely find myself in situations that really make me feel uncomfortable (that could partly be because of my age; the average man on the street or on a bus would be more likely now to expect me to be married and unavailable than when I was younger).

What I would like to share about are relationships on a deeper level. When I came to the Philippines, I had no desire to become romantically involved with a Filipino. I was aware that the cultural differences could create difficulties in such a relationship. I don't believe I was prejudiced; I was just wary of the problems that can occur in such situations.

However, in my third term in the Philippines, those feelings began to change. I had learned the language well, and felt quite at home in Filipino culture. I had many close Filipino friends, and believed I had a good understanding of Filipino culture (realizing at the same time that a foreigner can never FULLY understand this culture). I enjoyed eating Filipino food and living simply. I had come to have a great deal of respect for many Filipino men (several of them pastors). So I began to consider the possibility that "God's will" for me might be a Filipino. As these changes began taking place within me, at the age of 31 I met a Filipino pastor just a few months older than me. We only met briefly, but I was attracted to him, and even more so after I saw him a second time. I wondered if maybe God was arranging something. Within a short time, this pastor began to court me.

At that point I had to wrestle with many issues. I felt that if I were to marry a Filipino, I would need to be committed to following him in what he felt to be God's leading in his life. That would probably mean living in the Philippines for the rest of my life. (I felt pretty strongly that I wouldn't want to live outside of the Philippines -- I would always have that little doubt in my mind if I had been his "green card" out of the Philippines). Was I really willing and able to make the Philippines my permanent home, maybe even at the cost of never returning to my country of birth? I also had to deal with issues of just HOW simply I could live. Could I live on a provincial pastor's salary (maybe less than $100/month)? Could I wash clothes by hand every day? Could I do without some of the extras I was accustomed to? Could I eat rice and fish morning, noon, and night? Could I get by without the fellowship of other "foreigners"? Could I raise Filipino children? These and many other questions faced me head on and, as I considered each one, I believed that I indeed could, with God's grace, be happily married to a Filipino.

With that thought in mind, I did nothing to discourage the attentions of this pastor. We spent many hours together and talked about subjects far and wide in our conversations. In a very short time,

we were involved in a very serious relationship. I was frustrated and disappointed with the speed at which everything advanced in our relationship. I was expecting a long courtship, with much time to get to know each other on more of a friendship level. However, things did progress very rapidly, and it wasn't long before he was telling me that he loved me. Although I was feeling rushed and not very ready, it wasn't very long before "*sinagot ko siya"* ("I gave him my answer"). We talked about marriage, but I wasn't ready to make any definite plans at that point. I was very happy, though . . .

. . . but not for long. Within weeks, I had very strong misgivings about whether this really was the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. As a matter of fact, I was pretty sure that it wasn't. This really had little to do with culture; it was a matter of personality. But even as I felt that I wanted out of the relationship, I was also very confused. All the circumstances bringing us together had seemed to work together so well that I had assumed God was in it. Also this man, a pastor, was SO SURE (At least that's what he told me) that I was "God's will" for him. And then there was that night when I had been so unsure of whether I should be involved with this man, and a sudden peace had come over me that I had assumed was God's assurance that we were meant for each other.

I talked with several close Filipina friends who were very careful not to tell me what to do but who seemed supportive of my desires to break off the relationship. It took me several weeks to do it, though. First I pleaded with God that He would open the man's eyes and that we would mutually be able to decide that our relationship was not right. As time passed, though, and we talked about what was happening to me, it became obvious that he would never reconsider. At that point I felt a desperate fear that maybe God was going to make me "stick to my commitment" with this guy. Verses about keeping a vow and "letting your yes be yes" plagued me. (Looking back I can see how Satan can use Scripture to deceive us just as God can use Scripture to lead us.) I told the man that I needed some time to think and didn't want to see him for several weeks (he was a very persuasive sort and I was discovering that I was far too easily swayed by him). I prayed that God would make it very clear to me within that time as to what my next step should be. I thank God for his mercy; I didn't have to wait weeks for the answer, just a matter of days. God made it very clear to me that it was time to get out of this relationship. By the way, He used my godly (and usually non-interfering) parents to give the confirmation I was so desperately looking for.

Within days our whirlwind romance was a thing of the past. But can anything like that ever really be past? Both of us were affected deeply (albeit in very different ways) by what happened. For him, his hurt appeared to be very deep and he seemed unable to let me go. Also, loss of face was considerable as I had been introduced to his entire family and many of his friends as "the one" for him. His ministry as a pastor suffered as shattered emotions prevented him from carrying on as he should have . Only he could tell you how deeply he was affected.

On the other hand, my initial response was tremendous relief and thankfulness to God for leading me out of the relationship. I have never regretted the decision to end it. At the same time, I felt great sorrow for the pain that I had caused not only for him but likely for his family as well. I also felt great shame. Filipinos don't take "steady" relationships as casually as Westerners tend to. I, a missionary, had made a grave mistake and it showed in my ministry, too. As a teacher, I had failed to provide a good example and had damaged my reputation. I very seriously considered leaving the Philippines as a result.

However, God is gracious and He provided me with a change in ministry and location at a crucial time. By God's grace, as I write this I'm as content as I have ever been both in ministry and in my life as a single. He is also enabling me to see some of the reasons why He allowed me to get into such a mess. Thankfully, our God works all things together for good.

I've given you a tiny glimpse into several months of my life. Now I'd like to share with you some of the cultural things I learned through this experience. As I said, culture was not the primary difficulty in our relationship. It was, however, a complicating factor especially in the early stages of our relationship. So I'd like to share some of those things with you. I knew many basic Filipino LCM (Love, Courtship and Marriage) principles already, but there were other things I didn't know!

1. When a Filipino male seriously courts a girl and declares his intentions, he has already decided that he wants to marry her (tat least that's how it should be among Christians). As opposed to the Western concept of dating, he is not getting to know her for the purpose of determining if he would like to get more seriously involved with her. That decision has already been made in his mind and now it's up to him to convince the girl.

2. An implication of #1 is that a girl can practically give a guy the "cold shoulder" and he won't give up. In Western culture, if a girl doesn't show a bit of interest, she'll never get "asked out". But in the Philippines, it's better NOT to show much interest at the start. I wanted to get to know this guy better, and was trying to encourage a friendship, but he read it as a much deeper interest right from the start. This created tension. I felt that he was being inconsiderate in pushing so fast, but that's how he was reading my signals. Meanwhile, he was frustrated because I appeared to be giving contradicting signals. I was saying with words that I needed to have time to be friends for a while first, but my openness was telling him something completely different. (By the way, if you haven't learned it yet it's vital that you do -- to Filipinos, direct words are not believed nearly as much as the underlying meaning or the non-verbal communication).

3. One frustration I encountered had to do with who controls the speed at which a relationship develops. With my background, I felt that he should set the pace in our relationship, and I was so disappointed that it advanced so quickly. Only later did I realize that, from the Filipino viewpoint, I was to blame for that more than he was. It was up to me to put the brakes on the relationship; showing my interest too early and too openly was not the right way to slow down what was developing!

4. One of the ways in which I non-verbally communicated commitment to this fellow was by going places with him alone. I figured we were still at the friendship, getting-to-know-each-other stage until we verbally expressed deeper commitment to each other. But for a girl to go anywhere with a guy without a companion is for her to say that she is deeply interested in the guy.

5. Another bad mistake I made was agreeing to go visit his family. In my opinion getting to know this person's family seemed a very important part of getting to know him, especially in a culture where you marry a family as much as an individual! However, a girl only goes with a guy to be presented to his family in or near the final stage of their relationship. No wonder he didn't believe me when I said I wasn't sure yet whether I was really committed to him or not!

6. This non-verbal or underlying communication figured into our relationship in other ways. In the early stages of courtship I tried to get some input from Filipinos who knew both of us. At the time, I felt that no one was discouraging us from letting things develop. Looking back I can see that negative signals were being directed my way and I was blind to them. Answers to my questions were somewhat evasive with the intent to express hesitation about a relationship between us.

7. Another communication problem centered around idioms. What words mean literally can differ greatly from the meaning behind those words. During our courtship, he asked me "*May pag-asa ba ako*?" ("Do I have hope?"). At that point I was really wanting to get to know him better so that I could decide if he was the man for me or not. I thought there was a very good chance I would decide he was, but there was also a definite chance that I would decide he wasn't, either. Westerners tend to think in terms of "black and white" and aren't accustomed to answering questions vaguely. I was thinking in terms of only a "yes" or "no" answer and I couldn't truthfully say "no"! (I found out later that the best thing I could have said was "I don't know" until I felt sure one way or the other). Anyway, I answered "Yes", which to me meant "50/50" - there was a 50% chance that I'd decide we were meant for each other. I happened to find out that the Filipino meaning behind this question is very different. To say "yes, you have hope" means that you are 95% sure the relationship is meant to be and you just don't want to say it yet! This was one miscommunication that I just happened to discover -- how many

dozens of others may have slipped by unnoticed, creating frustration in both of us with neither of us realizing that miscommunication had occurred?!

8. Another aspect of miscommunication comes with how much we take words at face value. When this man told me "I love you" and "I believe you are God's will for me", he also said "If you say no, I'll never get married unless you marry someone else." That put a tremendous guilt trip on me (and I also felt that it was a very unfair and manipulative thing for him to say). But I have been told that I shouldn't have taken him too seriously. There are certain things that a man is sort of expected to say to show how much he loves a girl and this is one of them. My initial response when I heard that was to be angry that a pastor would lie! But we need to be very careful about making such judgments. Are Westerners any different when we answer "fine" to the question "How are you?", regardless of whether we feel fine or not? A Filipino girl wouldn't feel that such statements were dishonest; she would be honored that he was expressing such deep love for her.

9. I was also disappointed with what seemed to me to be a deliberate attempt to deceive me into believing he was someone he wasn't. I was so impressed with him from the beginning, only to later realize that the person I thought I fell in love with was very different from the person he actually was. It's probably a tendency in all of us to present ourselves in the very best light and hide some parts of our character. However, it seems to me that this may be more true of Filipino males. Again, it's not a dishonest thing from their viewpoint; it's expected for them to make as good of an impression as possible even if it's not completely accurate. A Filipina, knowing this, would be wary of entering a relationship quickly for fear of discovering that her boyfriend/husband was a very different person than she thought he was.

Actually, Filipinos in general are quite conservative in developing intimate friendships. They are very friendly and hospitable and quickly make acquaintances. However, they are much less likely to be open in sharing about their inner selves than Westerners. Filipino culture does not view vulnerability as a strength but as a weakness. These cultural characteristics extend to dating couples as well. One Filipino pastor estimated that the average Filipino couple entering marriage probably only know each other at a level of about 20%.

10. There are different terms for ending a relationship and the meaning of these is still not completely clear to me. There's a difference between "cooling off" a relationship and "breaking up." Cooling off a relationship is not a total break and leaves room for reconciliation. It seems to be the gentler way of breaking up, but not necessarily the fair way (as in my case). Terms like this need to be clarified between the parties involved; your understanding of "cooling off" may be very different from his.

11. A guy rarely breaks up with a girl. If the guy is the one to break a relationship, the girl suffers much humiliation. It's acceptable (although difficult) for a girl to break the relationship but very much looked down upon for the guy to do so. Since he was the one who approached the girl with intentions of marriage (don't forget that relationships are only entered with the intention of it leading to marriage), it's not considered proper or fair for him to back out of it.

What has come through most clearly to me through this experience is the danger of miscommunication in a cross-cultural relationship. Obvious differences in culture definitely need to be considered and dealt with. However, in the long run, these things of which we are aware are not what create the most difficult problems. The greatest tensions result from miscommunication of which we may be completely oblivious. We hear again and again how important communication is in a marriage. We also hear that, because of the difference in male and female thinking, good communication takes a lot of work. When you add to this the differences in language and in culture, the potential for miscommunication greatly increases.

I personally am not against cross-cultural marriage. I am aware of many such marriages that are very good marriages. I am also aware of many that aren't so good, and hear stories of those who have

given up trying to make their marriage work or who are still working at it but desperately wish they had never gotten themselves into it in the first place. Personally I have come to the conclusion that I would rather not put myself into such a situation. Add to the above-mentioned three factors (male/female communication, language, and culture) the fact that I have lived on my own for more than ten years, and the adjustments that I would face seem almost insurmountable.

My advice to others who may someday find themselves facing the possibility of developing a relationship with someone of this culture is "take it slow." For women, even if you have an interest in someone who is courting you, don't let him know that at first. For men, don't court a woman until you know her well enough to know that you want to marry her. Otherwise you may find yourself in a relationship that is very difficult to get out of. Don't rush. Give yourself a long time to prayerfully consider your decision. Far, far better to spend time making a decision and make the right one than to rush into a quick decision and regret it later. By the grace of God I realized my mistake before I was married and could still back out of it. However, it would have been far better to have seen these things before a serious relationship developed between us. As one Filipino man said, "If only you had discovered all of these things before you had given him your answer."

My prayer would be that you would be able to learn from some of my mistakes and maybe save yourself and someone else from the kind of heartache I put myself and my friend through.

AN UPDATE, 2013 (17 years later)

I have now been married for 10 wonderful years to an amazing Filipino man! My husband and I met in a Filipino church in the United States. At the time of our marriage in 2003, he had lived in the States for 10 years, the same amount of time that I had lived in the Philippines. I think both of us being bi-cultural and bilingual, having lived in each other's cultures, has had a very positive impact on our marriage.

Our married life so far has been lived in the United States. Now, however, we're in the midst of preparing for a move back to the Philippines with our two children. Our God moves in amazing and unexpected ways and His ways are always best. Only He knows what my next update might include!