

## A Guide to Love Across Cultures

By Helgi Eyford, For Neighbours



The tradition of giving red roses as an expression of romantic love is a culturally specific gesture.

Photograph by: Reuters , For Neighbours

The most common cross-cultural experience for most of us is with members of the opposite sex. It is almost as if the other sex speaks a different language or comes from a different planet.

These differences are multiplied exponentially when you fall for

someone from a different culture. This is increasingly likely given that 25 per cent of Calgarians were born outside of Canada and presumably come from a different culture. In fact, for some of my young friends, cross-cultural romance is the norm. I asked Sarah if she had ever dated someone from another culture.

"Actually, I can't remember when I dated someone from my own culture," she replied.

I asked Justin about the challenges of dating someone from another culture. "Flirting with someone from another culture is more fun because there is more uncertainty. But it is more challenging once you are in a relationship."

Here are five things to think about when thinking about a cross-cultural romance.

- How do you show interest?

How direct you should be when flirting differs between cultures. In high context cultures (think Thailand or China) people are indirect and only suggest what they mean. In low context cultures (think Alberta or Texas) people say what they mean and mean what they say. I remember an Iranian woman that I was interested in as a young man. I approached her and introduced myself at an academic conference for singles. She smiled, excused herself and returned to giggling with her friends. I took that as rejection and moved on. I met her a year later at a party and she completely ignored me. I heard from a mutual friend that she was devastated when I started dating another woman. I guess she was too subtle for me.

- To whom do you give the flowers?

In individualist cultures (like Alberta) a man would focus his courtship rituals on the woman. In a collectivist culture, a man would focus his efforts on the family -- first the brothers, then the parents, then

the grandparents, then the ancestors . . . Ryan told me of a time when he was dating an Iranian girl in her twenties. "After a week, her parents wanted to have a group discussion about the relationship -- as if it was their business." The importance of parental approval of the parents was strange for Ryan. "I don't think my parents even knew that we had dated."

- The role of bling

In some cultures, the man should wear flashy clothes and buy his date extravagant gifts. In other cultures, this would be seen as superficial and presumptuous. This is a function of the relative importance a culture places on romance and relationships as opposed to rules and achievement.

- How to spend our money?

Marianne told me a story of her Canadian friend who married an Egyptian man. They were down to their last dollar when a friend came over to visit. The husband went out and spent all the remaining money on soft drinks to serve the friend. Canadian and most Northern European cultures value practicality and prudence, while Egyptian and most Mediterranean cultures would place relatively more importance on hospitality.

- Why are we together anyway?

Many of my friends from India tell me that their arranged marriages are more successful than romantic marriages.

This points to radically different ideas about the purpose of marriage -- in western, individualist cultures the purpose of marriage is happiness for the couple. In eastern, collectivist cultures the purpose of marriage is partnership and family.

Those who manage to find a way through these differences do so by consciously negotiating expectations. It is almost as if they create their own culture of love.

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Did You Know

- People in China hang lanterns and young people look for first love on Spring Lantern Festival, which occurs on the first full moon of the new year (Feb. 21 this year).

- People in Brazil exchange gifts, flowers and chocolates on the Day of the Enamoured, which occurs on June 12.

- People in Israel have rejuvenated an ancient holiday and pronounce love, propose marriage and give flowers on Tu B'Av, which occurs in July or August depending on the year.

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