

Graduation forces couples to have “the talk”

BY ANNE REBAR
Columnist

As the end of the school year looms closer I find myself constantly worrying about job applications, graduate schools and how long I'm going to be able to endure living with my parents before I am diagnosed as clinically insane. However, others have even bigger decisions being thrust at them by the graduation countdown. As the clock keeps ticking, couples across campus are having “the talk” about where their relationships are going and what lies ahead after the caps are thrown May 8. I must say I do not envy them.

Couples make the decision whether to break up or stay together and try to make a long-distance relationship work. I'm not a huge advocate of the long-distance option, to be honest. When I was a freshman, many of my friends came to Truman with high school boyfriends and girlfriends living back home or at another school. None of those relationships are still ongoing.

However, separating after high school and separating after college are very different situations. Couples are — usually — more mature and have had more life experience when leaving college than when leaving high school. Plus they have been exposed to a wider dating pool and have had the chance to see who

else is out there. After college graduation, couples have a better chance of making the long-distance situation work, especially because the length of time they will have to be separated is often only a few years at most.

The Dating Doctor, David Coleman, said on his website that long-distance relationships are very hard to make work, but having a finite amount of time you have to be apart makes it much easier. He said that knowing there will be a time in the not-too-distant future that the two of you will be back together makes enduring the distance easier. Coleman also said that when in a long distance relationship, do not force each other to call every day. Visit often, but not so much that someone feels suffocated, and send e-mails, text messages or care packages to let the other person know you are thinking about them.

Other couples might choose not to endure the long-distance drama and simply move somewhere together. They may not necessarily choose to live to-

gether, but choosing to job-seek in the same city or apply to the same grad schools ensures they will be able to stay together.

This can be risky, as one person might be forced to compromise, but after getting a job and settling in, relocating to be with your significant other will only get harder. While you both are completely open and have nothing holding you back, after college seems to be the opportune time to figure out where you want to go, together.

The worst-case scenario is you both get there and then break up and don't know anyone else in the city. If that happens, well, you've just started a new job, so it's the perfect opportunity to start over, make new friends and move on.

It's a scary prospect for some, but it can be exciting if you think optimistically.

However, if you two have decided to move to another city together, chances are the relationship is pretty serious, so it's more likely you will be able to continue your relationship along



with your life after college. It seems to be taboo in these days of empowered women for a girl to “follow” her boyfriend somewhere after college, but I have an issue with those who raise their eyebrows and look down their noses as they question, “You really want to move somewhere with him? What about your career? What if you break up?”

First of all, can't a couple make a decision together to move somewhere without one person “following” the other? Second of all, right out of college you can choose any city you want to start off your career, so why not choose one where the person you love will be as well? It doesn't have to be career-compromising at all. Third, so what if you do break up? We move on, we move out, we make new friends. It's not like the world will end when the relationship does. I think, for a couple who has been together long enough, finding somewhere to continue life together makes perfect sense.

Other couples have decided to

take another leap after graduation. This summer I will be attending the weddings of two of my close friends to the men they have been dating since freshman year. For many couples who have been together their whole college career, the walk down the aisle is just the next step. These days, the average marriage age is about 25 for women and 27 for men, so couples marrying right out of college are often victims of more raised eyebrows. If you love someone, have been together for that long and you want to get married, then why not get married? Marriage is a big step, but for many couples, it's the next logical step in the relationship. By the time you get a diploma, I'd say you are qualified to decide for yourself when you are ready to marry no matter how young you may be.

Graduation is looming, and couples will have to decide what's right for them. They might last and they might not, but college loves will still leave lasting memories and teach us valuable lessons.



BY ELIZABETH NECKA
Columnist

Every Sunday morning, I find my deepest, darkest secrets posted on the Web for everyone to see. Although I might not have authored those listed on the PostSecret website, the anonymous secrets often speak to me just as deeply as if they were my own.

PostSecret, brain child of Frank Warren, is an anonymous art project whereby people from all over the world write down their deepest secret on a postcard, decorate it and mail it away to an anonymous reader. If selected, it appears online or published in a book. Each week the site is flooded with stories of lost loves, regrets, greatest desires, greatest fears and feelings people can't find the words to say in real life.

Empathizing with someone else's secret each week makes me feel connected, and sending off a secret must feel freeing. My gut tells me that disclosing a secret is psychologically beneficial. There has to

The Truman Experiment:

Sharing secrets leads to decreased stress, better health

be some reason why thousands of people have sent in their secrets since the project's inception.

Psychologist James Pennebaker found that students who wrote about the facts and emotions of a traumatizing personal event compared to those who wrote about something more trivial not only went to the health center less frequently, but also showed improved immune system functioning. In addition, in 2002, breast cancer patients who coped by expressing themselves emotionally had fewer doctor appointments, decreased distress and better health. Research supports that when we suppress secrets, they more readily come to mind anyhow. Telling secrets makes them less intrusive and helps us make sense of them, which is one reason disclosing them is advantageous.

People who don't tell many personal secrets and are high in self-concealment tend to be more depressed and have less social support. Although the lack of social support might contribute to both their depression and their lack of confidants with whom to disclose their secrets, studies consistently find these results: Keeping yourself to yourself is harmful to your self.

But many times it is better not to blab. In a 1995 study by Anita Kelly and John Achter, the mental health of patients who

kept secrets from their therapists actually improved from the onset of the study. Although those patients who simply were more inclined to keeping secrets had more symptoms of mental disorders than those who were not high in self-concealment, holding onto a specific secret actually lessened the number of symptoms throughout therapy. As is often the case with deep secrets, revealing your secret might lead to more distress than liberation. The clients examined in the study often feared that their therapist would form a negative image of them and treat them differently or that revealing their secret might harm someone else.

The researchers suggest there are certain situations when keeping your mouth shut is actually for the better. The benefits of sharing a secret are only truly salient when possessing the secret is troubling and causes the secret-bearer internal stress. But if the secret absolutely must be told, they suggest that you be choosy in selecting a confidant and exercise discretion rather than telling many people. A confidant should be trustworthy, non-judgmental and able to offer advice. In this case, maybe it's not only the exercise of relieving oneself of the secret but also the social support from a confidant that makes secret-telling beneficial. If, and only if, these three conditions are met, the

relief of self-disclosure likely will exceed the perceived negative consequences.

Although PostSecret maintains one's anonymity, his or her dirty laundry is aired in public. Yet, the secrets rarely are met with judgment, mostly because there is such a strong network of people willing to confess to the same secret. Sometimes, Warren even updates the site with viewers' responses to the secrets, a form of advice. Although I often wish the postcard creators felt comfortable saying some of their secrets in real life, I'm glad they found an outlet. It seems PostSecret is the world's universal confidant.

I'm not a person who often keeps things to myself — I am very open with my close friends about what is on my mind. I feel like every time I confide, I give a piece of myself to my friend. I guess by these standards, I'm healthier for being so self-disclosing.

I recently realized that revealing the one secret that I haven't been able to tell might actually bring me more distress than satisfaction. It is something I don't want people to incorporate into their image of me, not because it's bad but just because it's no one's business but my own. But I had to get it off my chest.

What did I do with it? I sent it to PostSecret.

MEDITATIONS OF MICHELLE: Fasting exposes inner strength

BY MICHELLE MARTIN
Columnist

The first time my friend Shane mentioned he wanted me to fast for two days with him, I hoped he would forget about the idea if I never brought it up again. But he persisted, and with a groan I caved in.

Fasting sounded like the least fun thing I could do for the weekend. No food? No snacks? No drinks apart from water and the occasional tea? Obviously I wouldn't have the energy to go to parties or do any reliable amount of homework. I resigned myself to a weekend of misery.

Here's the best way I can describe the hunger pangs: It's like when the electricity is out and you keep walking around the house trying to flip the light switches on. And when you're bored you think, “Well, because the power is out, I can't do too much. I could go get online! Oh, wait, I can't.” When fasting, you go about your day thinking, “Man, when I'm done doing this I can eat some spaghetti. ... Oh, nope. Can't do that.”

For a while, my head just buzzed with, “I want chocolate. I want pizza.” I became irritable at the thought of how much longer I would have to subsist without the

satisfaction of getting a meal in my stomach. After a while, though, my growling stomach became a profound and lucid teacher. After I accepted my hunger, it eventually faded into the background, becoming just another bodily function, like a heartbeat. A pure, crystallized peace covered my heart and mind. I had moments of complete clarity where thoughts stopped their typical disconnected meanderings and were completely synced to what I was doing in every moment. Meditation became effortless when fasting, like water running smoothly over rocks. As I detached from food, I more easily detached from the many other trivial worries occupying my mind every day. I felt a peace and stillness rising within me that kept me coming back for more.

Food is such a primal need. We know we must eat three times a day to sustain ourselves, but sometimes we eat to fill voids. Lonely? Munch on brownies. Bored? Bag of chips. Procrastinating? Make a sandwich. Denying yourself food snatches away this safety blanket from beneath your feet, exposing you to everything you've been hiding from by constantly eating — possibly the reason Gandhi said, “What eyes are for the outer world, fasts are for the inner.” As I repeatedly denied

myself food throughout the day, my reasons for compulsively eating became strikingly apparent. Often, I eat when I'm not even hungry. I take bites to distract myself from homework or to assuage boredom.

Many religious traditions know the power of conscious self-restraint. Yogis have practiced fasting and silence for ages, and Christians commonly practice giving something up for Lent. Pythagoras wouldn't let his pupils learn his highest teachings unless they underwent a 40-day fast (though I wouldn't recommend it).

Restraint is a powerful way to expose your weaknesses and cultivate an inner strength of stillness. We all have somewhat unnecessary pleasures we think we could never let go of — snacks, shopping, Facebook, alcohol, sex, television. I find that if one of these habits starts to compulsively control me, then I need to stop for a while. A few weeks ago, I gave up processed sugar for almost a week. After the first two days I stopped craving

it, and then I felt liberated. I no longer had to buy sugary snacks to fulfill my cravings. I didn't have to struggle with whether to indulge. I ate only healthy food, with deep satisfaction. Although I eventually caved in when Easter came around and I ate my entire chocolate bunny

in one day, I was still empowered, now knowing the heightened power of my will and self-control.

An occasional day of silence is supposedly another very powerful tool, especially if you talk incessantly or use words venomously. One woman who suffered

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from a desire to compulsively lie wrote in Stephen Cope's “The Wisdom of Yoga,” “It's like a whole new inner world has opened up. As I quiet down the external chatter of my mind, the internal world of chatter comes into focus.” I promise you, there are a thousand reasons why you do the things you know you shouldn't, and consciously fasting from them brings those lurking demons to light and exposes them for the falsehoods they really are.



If you try this, expect a hard but worthwhile journey. But try not to hate every moment of your hardship. Instead, accept your suffering. Watch it. Watch the thoughts that sprout around it. See where it takes you. Try not to find alternative compulsions to fill the void — like distracting yourself with friends or movies so you don't have to face your own darkness. Getting a group to fast together provides much needed moral support and inspiration.

Shane and I felt that fasting was so powerful that we now get groups together about once a semester to share the experience through meditations and community. Last weekend, we were on our fourth group fast.

I leave you with the words of Gandhi: “A genuine fast cleanses the body, mind and soul. It crucifies the flesh and to that extent sets the soul free.”