



Tomorrow's Another Day

A Review of

The Theory of Everything (2014)

by James Marsh (Director)

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Reviewed by

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Marriages are complex; relationships are fraught with risk. Couples interact with each other, most commonly on a daily basis across many years. All of these interactions may lead to disagreements and disturbance. Each person in a relationship has different beliefs, habits and interests built from different backgrounds; any of which can work to disrupt the relationship. Values and interests may change; someone new may become more attractive than the current mate; or serious disagreements may develop. Even under the best of circumstances, couples must be actively engaged in and committed to maintaining a happy relationship to sustain their marriage.

So imagine the challenges for a couple when one is a religious young woman studying poetry and literature, and her partner an atheistic young man embarking on a career in theoretical physics. Further, the young man has just been diagnosed with motor-neuron disease (MND) with a prognosis of complete debilitation and early death. *The Theory of Everything* dramatizes this marriage, the real-life relationship of Jane (Felicity Jones) and Stephen Hawking (Eddie Redmayne). Although the relationship does eventually “go wrong,” that is, end in divorce, their marriage was apparently successful for many years as Stephen famously outlives his disease. An overarching theme of the movie draws upon a metaphoric parallel between Stephen’s scientific work and his relationship with Jane; the movie is primarily a marriage drama and not one that emphasizes Stephen’s career. We, therefore, discuss their relationship, and draw upon Gottman’s model of romantic relationships called *The Sound Relationship House* (Gottman & Gottman, 2013) and Gottman and Levenson’s (2002) two-factor model predicting divorce.

The Building of the Relationship

Building “love maps” is the first level of the Gottmans’ *House* theory. At this level couples are attempting to learn more about each other and each is inviting the other to learn about them. In spite of their divergent interests and deeply held values, Jane and Stephen overlook their differences and enthusiastically accept each other’s invitations. Their first date in the film is at the May Ball, a formal dance for students under a spring night sky on a college lawn. After watching other couples dance for a while, Jane asks Stephen, “Shall we

dance?" Stephen quickly replies, "Oh, no, no. Happy to observe the phenomenon—but I can't possibly imagine participating." Jane is obviously disappointed, and Stephen notices. He attempts to ameliorate her let down by making a scientific observation! Couples are dancing under a black light. Popular in the 1960s because of the psychedelic glows it makes in the dark, black light emits ultraviolet radiation. Stephen explains to Jane that men's cuffs and collars glow and the women's dresses do not because of the residual fluorescence left in the cuffs and collars by the laundry detergent used to wash them. Stephen then relates this fact to the glow of the stars in the heavens above them—a very romantic notion in the context of the conversation. Thus, Stephen cleverly uses a scientific observation and his knowledge of cosmology to delight Jane's poetic sensibilities. To create a shared memory of the conversation, Stephen delivers a box of Tide laundry detergent to Jane's doorstep the next morning. Jane is thrilled and enchanted.

The Gottmans' *House* theory emphasizes the importance of sharing fondness and admiration in maintaining relationships. Such sharing becomes particularly important when couples are dealing with inevitable disagreements. Although at odds with Stephen's atheism, Jane's deep understanding and respect of Stephen's work is humorously demonstrated in a luncheon scene many years after they were married. They are entertaining a guest from Jane's church. Jane dispassionately, but wittily, explains Stephen's rejection of the idea that the universe has a beginning, and, thus, his rejection of the idea of a Creator. She represents the two main branches of modern physics, quantum theory and general relativity, using a pea and a large potato speared on forks. Holding up the pea, she says, "Quantum Theory, the laws that govern the very small—electrons, particles and so on," and then holding up the potato, she continues, "General Relativity. . .which governs the very large, planets and such."

Holding up the potato and the pea, she states that Stephen is trying to find a unifying theory that explains both the laws of the very large and the very small. Relativity, laws of the very large, allow for the calculation of the beginning of the universe and, thus, the existence of God. She then stirs the pea with some more peas on her plate and explains that Stephen has found that the laws that govern the small are ruled by chaos. She says, "But if you want to incorporate peas into the menu, which Stephen now wants to do, then it all goes. . ." "Tits up," interjects Stephen. When the guest looks confused and aghast, Jane completes Stephen's thought, "Tits up. . . a Godless mess."

But then Jane presents her side. "Einstein hated peas, Quantum Theory. 'God doesn't play dice with the universe,'" quotes Jane citing the discoverer of relativity to argue her case. "Seems He not only plays dice. . .," she starts, but Stephen smiles and finishes for her, "He throws them where we can't find them." This part of the interchange charmingly illustrates how these two very different people maintained their humor and respect for each other in spite of their profound disagreement about a very important subject to them both. It also supports Gottman's finding (Gottman & Gottman, 2013) that couples who successfully navigate their disagreements do so because they are able to disagree respectfully and with humor. The first part of the scene allows the viewer to appreciate the intellectual nature of their relationship and the source of their happiness together.

However, the scene continues, and as it does the couple's interchange becomes tense. As Stephen explains his motivation for his work, Jane literally turns her back to him to pour the guest a glass of wine. Jane's behavior may be seen as a classic "turning away" gesture as described by the Gottmans. Her actions appear to represent a lost opportunity to make a

deposit of an emotional connection with her partner. Tellingly, the tension in the conversation along with Jane's behavior portends deterioration in their relationship.

The Dissolution of the Relationship

The Theory of Everything highlights Stephen's strength as a keen observer and thinker coupled with his utter weakness as a doer. In an early scene, the film shows a young Stephen as a coxswain on a competitive rowing crew. The coxswain's responsibilities require astute observation of the rowers, the water and the competition as he guides the racing shell and sets the pace for the oarsmen. The scene emphasizes the oarsmen doing the hard work of pulling Stephen along and doing his bidding as he serenely sits at the aft of the racing shell.

Even before the onset of MND, the film repeatedly reinforces the narrative that Stephen is inclined to avoid physical activity. A scene many years after he is completely disabled, and after he lost his voice, shows an interchange where he is asked how he was able to deal with his physical limitations. Through his voice synthesizer he famously replies, "There are things I cannot do, but they are mostly the things I don't particularly want to do anyway."

However, everyday life does require physical activity for all of us to live—including severely disabled theoretical physicists. In Stephen's case, the physical activity had to be done by someone else—mostly Jane. The physical burdens on caregivers of patients with neurological disease are well documented (Aoun et al., 2013; Baxter et al., 2013; O'Connor, McCabe, & Firth, 2008; Vilchinsky, Dekel, Revenson, Liberman & Mosseri, 2014). Jane falls in love with Stephen's intellect and childlike, happy-go-lucky attitude, but the physical burden of caring for Stephen and the children they soon had in their marriage finally takes a toll on their relationship.

The movie shows Jane laboriously loading and unloading all the family's luggage when they vacation for a week with Stephen's parents. Significantly, Stephen offers no words of encouragement or asks his parents to help Jane unload the car. He watches her struggle doing this work in silence in his wheelchair, and he seems oblivious to her physical exhaustion. In Gottman's terms, Stephen is turning away rather than turning toward her to offer some means of support even if it is just a verbal thank you or show of sympathy. Eventually, Jane begins to feel abandoned. This abandonment leads her to have an affair with Jonathan (Charlie Cox), the organist at the church she attends. Jonathan gives her both emotional support and physical help with the demands of taking care of Stephen and the children. It is an affair that at one point Stephen seems to encourage. Stephen tells her, "I understand you need more help. And if there is. . . someone. . . who is prepared to offer it, I won't object, as long. . . as long as you continue to love me." In a sense, Stephen's gesture seems supportive, but it also signals a diminution of his feelings for Jane.

Stephen eventually loses what voice he has after an emergency tracheotomy. Even before the tracheotomy, Stephen's voice had become very slurred and hard to understand. Because Jane had learned to understand his halting speech patterns, she often acted as his interpreter. However, after losing his voice, Jane loses this role and connection with Stephen. Before obtaining the voice synthesizer, Stephen had to learn to communicate using a Spelling Board, which groups letters of the alphabet by colors in order to augment the spelling of words. After the tracheotomy, a nurse, Elaine Mason (Maxine Peake), was

hired by the Hawkings to help with his communication training and perform other nursing duties. Elaine is young and attractive and is enthralled by the prospect of taking care of the famous physicist. It is not long before Elaine takes over almost all of Stephen's communications assistance and nursing once done by Jane. Elaine and Stephen become romantically involved and this leads to the final dissolution of the Hawking marriage.

The Theory of Everything Metaphor

As referenced above, Stephen's life-long ambition was to unify quantum theory with the theory of relativity. The movie draws a metaphoric parallel between Stephen's ambition and his and Jane's ambition to unify their lives in spite of fundamental differences in their personal values. Because Stephen was unable to find a unifying equation and his marriage failed, the movie's overall message is less than positive. However, Stephen Hawking is still at work, and he and Jane were happy for many years in spite of their differences. Furthermore, it is reported that they remain friends and both continue to support their adult children together (Hawking, 2008). To quote Scarlett O'Hara from a very different kind of love story, "After all, tomorrow is another day" (Selznick & Fleming, 1939).

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