Love & Money: A Life Guide for Financial Success

Author: Jeff D. Opdyke
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Reviewer: **Ann Coulson**
Certificate Program Director
Kansas State University

Before reading this book, I assumed that it was just one of the many personal finance books on bookstore shelves today. However, this book is about relationships and money. The author is a journalist who writes a weekly personal finance column for *The Wall Street Journal* and he peppers his book with examples from his family as well as multiple comments and examples submitted from readers of his column.

The book covers the different life stages and how money impacts and is impacted by each particular stage. It talks about financial compatibility in relationships, beginning even before the walk down the aisle. Opdyke recommends that two individuals in a relationship headed for marriage should share credit reports before making the lifelong commitment. His point is that marriage is more than a union of two people; it also merges two individuals with perhaps very different money management styles and their before marriage spending and saving records. A partner entering a relationship with serious student loans and credit card debt is not necessarily a bad partner, it is just that the other partner needs to recognize that these financial obligations will require marital assets to repay and both partners need to have a plan for meeting these obligations. A great portion of the book talks about the impact of money on relationships. Opdyke points out that our history with money is an important dynamic in any relationship. One of my favorite quotes from the book was: ""I love you." Those three words promise to have the most dramatic effect on your personal finances."

Opdyke breaks the book into five different life stages: the formative years, which really has very little to do with a stage in the family life cycle, but more about basic personal financial issues such as spending plans and emergency savings; the early years which discusses topics such as financial compatibility and money as power in a marriage; the kiddie years which talks about children and money; the middle years which includes topics such as choices about lifestyle and trailing spouses; and the later years which includes not only the anticipated topic of retirement but also saving for college and what to do when parents need money.

There is nothing really new in what the author says: he states that the three key traits to improving overall financial health are controlling spending, saving, and a judicious use of debt. No financial counselor or planner would find these three traits surprising. Opdyke clearly defines money as a finite rather than a renewable resource. He says that too often we let the small expenses of everyday life ultimately influence our financial lives. The author does not spend time on blame; instead he points out that it is important to look for the root cause of discretionary spending problems because that helps control spending.

Opdyke writes about the difference in spending to meet individual needs versus spending to meet the needs of the family. He points out that it is essential that couples talk about money. He is a proponent of merging individual accounts because a single account requires trust and communication. He says "after all, it's not really about the money. It's about creating another level of intimacy in your relationship and bestowing trust on each other."

One chapter I found of interest was about money laundering. He defines money laundering as the frequent trips to the ATM or the checks written for more than the amount of purchase to allow us the freedom of unidentifiable cash in our pockets. He comes down pretty hard on this behavior, even going so far as pointing out that this is essentially stealing from the family and deters meeting family financial goals.

One section of the book talks about children and money. The author correctly points out that children cost money. He cites the *USDA Expenditures on Children* figures and he bluntly points out that the decision to have a child should not just be about wanting a child but also about what the parents are willing to give up in order to have the child.

He makes several important points in this section. He says that it is not our children who have the spending problem, it is us. It is our job as parents to teach them about needs and wants and the value of things. Opdyke points out that "saying no to children gives them freedom to moderate their own wants as they get older, a great trait to possess as an adult." He also says that we must be careful about how we say no to our children because we can inadvertently send our children messages that will have lifelong implications. What we say and do everyday with money is providing life lessons for our children. He recommends that we talk openly and honestly about money with our children.

Opdyke is quite blunt about retirement. He says that "people without money are without choices" when it comes to retirement and he points out that retirement is one of only a few life-altering events such as marriage, having children, and the death of a spouse. But he also points out that retirement planning is more than just saving sufficient funds; it is essential to plan what you want out of retirement as well.

One chapter is about college savings. While a topic such as this can require an entire course, Opdyke does bring together some excellent points and he does explain the costs, benefits, the pros and cons of several of the useful college saving instruments, as well as some of the important aspects one needs to know about saving for college.

One of the last chapters in the book is about handling requests from parents for money. He points out that just because a person is a relatively old adult does not make that person a financially responsible individual. While this is an event that not everyone will experience, for those who do, it can be gut-wrenching to choose between helping a parent or providing for one's own family. Opdyke anticipates that he will be in this situation, and he quite honestly explains how he intends to handle it. But he also recognizes the fact that what one thinks he will do in a situation like this may be very different from what one actually does when it occurs. He does point out the problems that can occur between a couple when one partner's parents need financial support.

The author is relatively young (mid-thirties) and his only child is in early elementary school. He writes mostly about what he has experienced or anticipates experiencing. Missing from the book include chapters on what to do when an adult child wants to return home to live with parents, parents who are expected to pay for expensive weddings for children, and the financial consequences of an adult child returning to school. These are situations which can have devastating financial impacts on a parent, and advice on handling these requests from children would have been helpful additions to the book.

I particularly like the fact that Opdyke believes that a marriage is not lost because of financial problems. He points out that a couple initially came together because of compatibilities and these compatibilities can provide important strengths in overcoming financial differences. Bottom line according to the author is that whatever the financial situation, communication between the partners is essential. Open and complete honesty breed better outcomes, both financially and relationally.

This book could be a useful addition to the library of a financial counselor or a financial planner. It could also be helpful to family, marriage, and pre-marital counselors. When working with couples it could be very helpful to have both partners read this book. It would certainly open the door to some interesting discussions. Even couples who do not have apparent money problems could benefit from reading this book because Opdyke does an excellent job of describing how seemingly innocuous behaviors are detrimental to meeting family financial goals.