

Reading

Looking for Love Online

She: I am honest, caring, romantic, and loving ... I know all the ads say this but mine is actually true! I have my character defects but try to work on them. I live life with integrity and want to meet someone who does the same... I work hard, I don't drink, I love my puppy, my kitten, warm clothes right out of the dryer, more than two pillows, cheesecake, diet Pepsi, my family, art, and home decor.... hopefully this has caught your eye.

He: I'm looking for a girl that takes care of herself but isn't like totally into herself, know what I mean? Someone who looks good on the inside and the outside. I don't need to go fast, love to just chill and have a good time. Friends first is fine with me but I hope you might be the one.

She: I am looking for a professional, college educated, totally charming, patient, caring, handsome, sentimental but not too sentimental, business-savvy, financially independent witty gentleman who is close to my age. Is this too much to ask for? He should love children, be single, have a big heart, be able to love unconditionally, want to know the inner beauty of a woman first, and, of course, be employed full-time.

He: Hi ladies, I'm Mr. Humble. I am a hard working guy that is looking for the right one. I wouldn't say i'm the best looking guy in the world, but i don't think I'm bad. If u need a guy that will treat u right, I'm the one. I have a good job, my own car, apartment, money, no kids, never been married, just hard to find someone for me.

She: I'm looking for the impossible. I'm searching for a guy with heart, personality, manners, respect, and who is caring and considerate. Also looking for someone NOT into head games. Why is it so hard to find someone like this?

He: I'm not settling for just getting by. I am looking for a cool lady to take out and have some fun. My favorite thing to do is smile and laugh. I like the sunshine and the rain. I like the sounds of crickets at night and birds in the morning. I like fishing, camping, the woods, the river, the mountains, the beach. I BBQ some great ribs. I can dress up but am most comfortable in jeans. I like a nice dinner out or staying home and watching a movie in my jammies. Have lots of friends. Nothing like walking hand in hand with someone special or getting a BIG hug.

She: Hi! I'm a single mature female, with lots of friends but still waiting for that special woman to rock my world! Everyone says I'm the perfect girlfriend... so why am i alone? Please no men or baggage. I work so please work too....email me u wont regret it.....

He: Tired of cruising the scene and ending up with Mr. Wrong? I'm a single relatively attractive male seeking same. You don't have to be Mr. Right, just be Mr. Real and as ready to leave head games and one night stands behind as I am.

She: Do you struggle in the bar scene? Do you wish you knew just the right way to attract a woman? I can help you with personalized, effective coaching that will improve your game dramatically. There will be some required reading and some discussion of basic principles, but the majority of your instruction will take place in the field with real women, with me winging for you. I guarantee you will be thrilled with your improved skills and the results that come with them. A face to face interview is required before I agree to take you on as a student. \$25 an hour.

He: I am an average guy with an average income and an average life totally recovered from an average divorce. I can't promise the moon or the stars, and I don't ride off into sunsets all that often, but I have a big warm heart and would love to share it with that special someone. Be in touch.

Message

You know what really affected me in those online ads we read this morning? How deeply each of those people needed to really connect with someone. As I listened to Teresa and Mike reading this morning, I could feel a quietness and a softness come over me, even during the points of humor, the need was so raw, so tender, so real. I thought to myself that we are a

lonely society. We have so much. We are the wealthiest country in the world, but many of us are deeply lonely, and we saw a small piece of that larger loneliness in those personals

I wish we could look into the family histories of the people who wrote those ads. Every one of those people has a history. How they present themselves in those ads, and what they’re looking for in a partner has been influenced by how they grew up. It’s in our families that we learn our values, that we learn how to respect one another and practice acceptance of one another, or not. Our families are the first model of intimacy that we will have and it will affect us for the rest of our lives. Harville Hendrix, author of “Getting the Love you Want” says that we tend to be attracted to people who have the best and worst characteristics of those who raised us. It’s our foundation for how we understand and look for love. What this means, is that it is highly likely that the kind of people we are attracted to and bring into our lives will put us in a place to keep working through the good stuff and the bad stuff that we inherited from the people who raised us.

When I was about 13 my dad realized that boys were beginning to look at me in a different way. Not as a little girl, but more as a woman. And quite honestly, he didn’t like it too much. He began to remember what he had been like as a teenage boy, how he had looked at girls and the kind of thoughts he’d had about girls, and he realized, to his horror, that teenage boys were looking at his daughter just like that and thinking the same kind of thoughts he’d thought as a teenager. It would be an understatement to say that it scared him half to death!

I think a lot of dads get nervous when they see their daughters turning into women. There are conflicted emotions, paternal protectiveness, and sometimes a deep desire just to stop time and hold onto that little girl. I’m pretty sure it’s not just the dads who feel like this. That sense of your kid moving from the innocence of childhood into complexity and independence of adulthood is, I think, one of the hardest things about being a parent. And there’s really nothing you can do about it except breathe, and try to accept what is happening, trusting and hoping that the guidance you provide will support them as they navigate that difficult path into adulthood.

Well, my dad had a lot of difficulty letting go, and the year I started high school he started fretting – thinking of all those unknown boys with their all too predictable thoughts and their all too predictable desires. He yearned for years that suddenly seemed simple and sweet and far too short, and in a moment of weakness said to me in that authoritative guilt-provoking way that he should have known would probably blow up in his face:

“I don’t want you to date until you’re 16.”

“Why?”

“You’re too young!”

“What do you want me to be a nun?”

“I said you’re too young. Give it some time.”

“Do you want me to be bitter and resentful when I’m old? If I never find someone in my whole life, if I die alone, it will be your fault!”

“Don’t argue with me. I said you’re not dating, and that means you’re not dating.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so, that’s why.”

How well do you think that went over?

We’re talking today about dating. The youth chose this sermon topic and I think it’s a great thing to be talking about in church. In my opinion, the purpose of religion is to help you make wise choices in life. I can’t think of anything that requires more wisdom than the choices you make about who you love, who you share your heart with, who you share your mind with, and, as time goes on, who you share your body with.

As teenagers, you are facing some new possibilities in your life, and one of those possibilities is sharing intimacy with another person. By intimacy I don’t mean just physical intimacy, but also emotional intimacy. Intimacy is the act of sharing yourself with another person, really welcoming another person into your life. As with so many of the important things in our lives, intimacy doesn’t always come naturally. The give and take of relationships is something that you have to learn. Sometimes you can have a lot of fun in the learning, and sometimes you make a lot of mistakes. It’s in our teenage years that we start

learning about more adult types of intimacy, and this involves making yourself vulnerable, taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from them.

Some churches have very specific advice that they give in regards to dating. Generally, they will say “no sex before marriage” and “date someone that has the same religious beliefs and values that you do.” While I respect the right of churches to have their own opinions on the matter, I really disagree with that approach, and so would many other Unitarian Universalists.

Our message is different. We are not about creating rigid ideologies or moral systems and then asking people to conform to them. We are about being responsive to the reality of life, of what is going on out in the world, and the real flesh and blood choices people make about the most important parts of their lives. For that reason we make no pronouncements about whether you have to be married or not to have sex, we accept all sexual orientations, and generally have a flexible attitude to relationships.

I have three general questions I ask of a relationship. One, is it mutual, meaning are you both there of your own free will and are you both equally committed? Two, is it informed, have you thought about this relationship, your needs and wants, and what you are able to give? Are you emotionally ready for the give and take of a relationship? And three, are you following your own values? Are you becoming more who you are and living the way you think you should be living because of this relationship? If you take the time to look with open eyes at your choices, you will know if the path you are following is right. This, I believe, is much more successful than strict rules that more often than not just leave people feeling guilty. Most people, regardless of what their churches tell them, will make their own choices. In general, telling people what they can and can't do doesn't work very well.

And I tell you, it sure didn't work for me. After my dad laid down the law, what do you think I did? Did I say to myself, “Well, I guess that means I can't date until I'm 16.” Absolutely not. I made my own private decision that I was going to show him he was wrong. I was going to start dating as fast as I could and prove to him that I was ready.

There was this guy John, who sat in front of me in French class, who really liked me. I didn't find him all that attractive. He was nice and all, I just didn't like him in that way. But I didn't know anyone else who liked me, and figured if I asked him to be my boyfriend, he'd say yes, so I waited for my chance. I got it the week my dad was going away to a conference. The day my dad's plane lifted off the runway, I asked John to be my boyfriend. He was, predictably, thrilled. I felt nervous and guilty. And then I felt really uncomfortable because I had never really planned for what came after. My plan had gotten as far as getting a boyfriend, I hadn't thought much about what I'd do once I had one.

John, however, knew exactly what he wanted to do. I'd find him standing at my locker between every class with these big hungry eyes, he insisted on holding my hand all the time, whispering sweet things in my ear, spent every lunch hour with me and my friends, and on a memorable Friday afternoon took me behind the portable classrooms to make out. I tell you, it was the longest week of my life.

I realized, much as I hated to admit it, that my dad was right. I was not ready to date. If you look at those three key questions, I didn't do good in any of them. The relationship wasn't mutual. The only person into it was John. It wasn't informed. I hadn't really thought about what I was getting into. And I was compromising my values. I really believed in honesty and fairness, and I wasn't being honest or fair to John, and I certainly wasn't being honest in sneaking around behind my dad's back. On the day my dad's plane landed, I told John it wasn't working out. He was crushed, I felt guilty, because I knew I'd done this for the wrong reasons. This had nothing to do with John and everything to do with my Dad.

I don't know what was harder, having all these conflicted feelings, or not feeling like I could talk about it at home. Because I'd broken the rules, I didn't feel comfortable talking about what had happened to me.

I know now that my dad was trying to protect me, to give me some guidelines. But rather than open a connection, he closed a door. He acted more from a place of fear than from a place of love. Who knows what would have happened if he'd made a different choice about what he did with his fear. I might have waited for someone with whom it felt right. Instead, I forced myself into a situation that wasn't right, hurt someone else, got hurt myself, and then didn't feel safe talking about it at home. I went through all that complex stuff, all the guilt and the sadness, by myself.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't think it would be fair to blame my dad for my decision to get a boyfriend for the wrong reasons. Just as he made a mistake with the way he set his rule, I made a mistake in how I responded. Both his poorly thought out rules and my secret rebellion were unfair and damaged our relationship. We both made mistakes.

The challenge of the teenage years is that you really do want to be able to handle more stuff on your own, but you still really need guidance and protection at the same time. And I know it's a fine line to walk. Studies show that when parents talk openly and honestly about love and dating and values, kids make smarter choices about dating than those whose parents say nothing, or simply make rules and expect them to be obeyed.

There's two parts to a healthy parent teenager relationship. First, parents respecting their kids, being open with their kids, listening carefully to their kids, and trusting their kids. Second, teenagers respecting their parents, being open with their parents, being able to listen to their parents, and trusting their parents. And, both forgiving each other when they make mistakes. You've never been a teenager before and most of your parents have never been the parents of teenagers before, so everyone's going to make mistakes. Everyone's going to say things they regret and try stuff that doesn't work, so being ready to forgive and start again is really important, and it will be worth it, because in the realm of love and dating, you will need as much support as you can get from those who love you more than anything.

Think about it this way, if you make mistakes with people you've lived with your whole life, how often are you going to make mistakes with someone you like, have a crush on, or even get to date? The skills you learn, about how to respect someone, how to listen, how to learn, and how to forgive – if you can learn those skills with your family, you're going to have those skills for when you date.

There's this assumption that dating is actually about finding the right person for you. This is only half of the equation. A bigger part of dating is figuring out who you are. What's important to you. What are your values and does the person you date need to share those values? What are your boundaries. How do you want to be treated in a relationship. What are you willing to offer someone else in a relationship. What do you need in order to trust them someone, love them, be open to them? When is it o.k. to be flexible and when do you have to say, “This is not for me.”

Some of this you have to do on your own. No one can answer these questions but you. But a lot of this, you don't need to do alone. Find those people you trust, whether it's your parents, or a teacher, a counselor, another relative, or a trusted friend, and talk about these things. Talk about what is on your mind, start working it through, knowing that you'll never have the perfect answers, that you're going to make mistakes, and that you will get through it.

Now you may be wondering why I would take a sermon on dating and talk so much about your relationship with your parents. Why haven't I talked about how you tell if someone likes you, or what you should do on a first date, or how to flirt, or how to find someone for you. The reason is that all that information is out there. It's on every teen website and in every teen magazine. You don't need to come to church to learn that. What you do come to church for is to learn how to be a kind, moral, and good person so that you can do good in the world. So for something like dating, I'm more interested in the spiritual foundation each of us needs focus on building, so that we can each go out there in the world and increase our chances of giving and getting the love we want.

The foundation for how we understand and experience love starts with our families. As you move into that world of dating and intimacy, use every place of support you have, including your family. It doesn't mean you won't make mistakes. It won't guarantee that the love of your life will suddenly appear and you'll live happily ever after. But, it does mean, I hope, that your life will be richer and more fulfilled, whatever happens to you. And you'll know that you are never alone.