

Dear Uncle Mike,

About three and a half years ago my grandma was diagnosed with lung cancer. The doctors operated on her and took one of her lungs. She goes regularly for checkups and two months ago they found cancer in her other lung. The doctors have done everything possible for her and they give her one year to live. My grandma stays with us so we can take care of her. It's hard seeing her like this, but there's not much a sixteen year old girl can do. How can I cope, or help her? Any advice?

Anonymous

Dear Anonymous,

Uncle Mike's advice to you is the same advice he gives to himself: love and cherish what you have for as long as you have it. The great lesson that death teaches all of us is that we take our lives and the people in them too much for granted. Rather than the first day of the rest of his life, Uncle Mike greets each morning with the realization this could be his last one on the planet. It helps him prioritize things. People die every day and few of them ever see it coming. Like all living things, your grandmother's days are numbered. Knowing roughly what the number is can, and should, give you both a new lease on life. The sadness is not that your grandmother is going to die. All of us do that. The sadness would lie in not appreciating her while she's alive. Spend as much time with her as you can and ask questions about her life. Who was she as a girl? What is she most proud of? What's the best advice anyone ever gave her? How did she and your grandfather meet? What was your mother like as a child? What we all realize as we get older is that there's much more to people than we thought. Learn from this woman so that who she is will live on through you.

You can also use this time to learn what you can about death and decide for yourself what it is and how you feel about it. Uncle Mike stopped believing in death years ago when he learned there was no room for it in the equations of quantum physics, our best picture of the way things are. Behind the world of form, the universe exists as consciousness. Each point of it is self aware. You, your grandmother, and Uncle Mike are all point conscious observers: unique, one of a kind perspectives of the unfolding of creation. Like every other perspective, we were all there at the big bang and will be there for the next half of forever. Everything is in motion, busily on its way somewhere else. Uncle Mike's body is busily on its way to system breakdown and recycling. His consciousness sees this as a change in perspective rather than a tragedy.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I'm 28 and my girlfriend is 24. We moved in together four months ago. A month ago her 17 year old sister moved in with us. She wasn't getting along at home so we told her she could stay with us and finish out her senior year. She started flirting with me the day she moved in. My girlfriend mostly laughs it off. I did too at first but it's getting worse. Nights when she's at work, her little sister walks around in a towel or watches tv in a long t-shirt and no underwear. This isn't my imagination. She goes out of her way to rub against me and when we're alone her good night hugs aren't innocent. She knows I know she's coming on to me but pretends she's just kidding around. This is driving me crazy. It doesn't help that my girlfriend and I aren't getting along great right now. Short of moving out, I don't know what to do. One of these nights I'm going to weaken. She keeps reminding me she'll be eighteen in two months. B.L., Portland, Oregon

Dear B.L.,

Uncle Mike suggests you remind yourself you could spend little sister's birthday behind bars. Depending upon your part of her good night hugs, you might already be in violation of some very serious laws. The moral situation is even worse. You know better, she apparently doesn't. What you're dealing with is a kitten sharpening her sexual claws on her big sister's boyfriend. Entire soap opera subplots are built around scenarios like this and, unless you'd like to see your social network dissolve along with your opinion of yourself, you don't want to act out your converging urges.

Although a trusting person by nature, Uncle Mike has a hard time believing that, if your girlfriend knew what was going on, she'd be laughing it off. By tradition, older sisters can read younger sisters like cheap novels, which can only mean that most of the low rent dalliance you're dallying with takes place behind your partner's back. This behavior makes you a swine. Since you're the card carrying adult, and have chosen to keep you and Lolita's business to yourself, it's your responsibility to apply the bucket of cold water. Gently but firmly tell the little temptress to put some clothes on, knock off the flirting and get started on her homework. Tap your own forehead with a mallet and direct your attention at the woman you're supposed to be involved with. With all due respect, you don't sound like a pillar of strength. If neither relationship gets better quick, Uncle Mike suggests you do the manly thing and run like the wind.

Dear Uncle Mike,

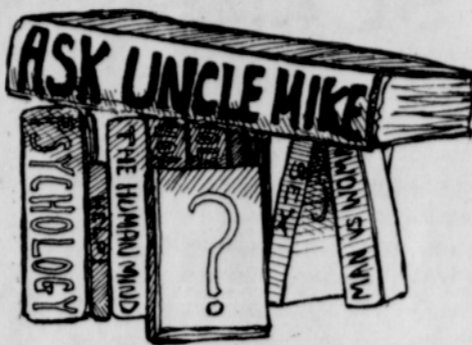
My husband's son is 14 and lives with his mother. He comes over most weekends. The two of us have never gotten along, a real personality clash, but we're civil and all. Last weekend, ten dollars was missing from my purse. No one else was in our home but him. I haven't told my husband because he's got a temper and would be real mad. I just wish he'd not come over but that won't happen of course. I'm (upset) because I can't leave my purse just lying around. How do you get a kid to stop stealing?

Drafted Mom, Astoria, Oregon

Dear Lady,

If you don't mind Uncle Mike saying so, you're a real piece of work. The youngster in question is your husband's son. If his welfare is not your concern, you should desert your post and retire to a cave where you can further hone your talent for ignoring the needs of others. Children steal because they feel powerless and imagine that money, or hubcaps, will provide it. The only power that deserves the name is love. Surprising as it might seem, the young man probably thinks you don't care about him, that you might even wish he weren't a part of your life. Like it or not, you're part of his, and your role as an adult (there's a chuckle) is to give him the tools he needs to have a life instead of a case history. If 1) you're certain the ten dollars was there and that your husband didn't take it, and 2) you think the boy's father would behave badly if you told him your suspicions, keep your dealings between you and the young person you're role modeling for. Next weekend, hand him a ten dollar bill. Tell him a boy his age needs some spending money and you forgot to give it to him last week. No, this isn't rewarding bad behavior, it's encouraging a healthy sense of shame, and letting him know there are people he can trust. The real trick is being one.

Letters to Uncle Mike: PO Box 1242, Depoe Bay, OR 97341



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THERAPY PAGE

LOWER LEFT CORNER

ABSTINENCE ANYONE?
by Victoria Stoppello

I heard that Time magazine is deciding who to put on the cover as the most influential person of the century and immediately my mind's eye saw an image: a woman surrounded by a bunch of kids, "kids in stair steps" as my family used to say about people who had kids about as often as possible. Sort of like chain smoking—actually chain smoking is a bit more conscious process; you light another cigarette just as you finish the first. With kids in stair steps, none of them really get grown before another takes the parents' attention, resources, time and patience. That first image was, of course, a poor, downtrodden third world woman, probably in a sari. That's the harsh, culture-bound image that first comes to my mind when over population crosses it.

Weeks later I ran into Ed at the post office. We chatted about many things, especially because Ed has had wide-ranging experience and in spite of that, still seems to have a good sense of humor. At one point he observed, "Well, a lot of problems are because there are just too many people. We ought to get rid of everybody over 55, they're not useful anymore—but I don't want to do that because I'm over 55 myself."

I responded, "No, Ed, keep the women over 55. They can't procreate any more and there's still a lot of useful things they can do—not like you guys who can keep on bearing offspring." I was thinking of teaching, nursing, and giving sound advice, which we older women love to do.

Then Ed suggested a good, strong, puzzling disease that would reduce world population, noting however that science loves the challenge of a sturdy disease, and so far science is winning most of the time. Ed observed, quite rightly, that any other overpopulated species starves, but whenever famine hits, we humans rush around sending in relief. Ed's final suggestion was to have four out of five people sterilized early in their lives. I didn't think to offer an old idea, that people should be licensed to raise children—it's one of the only life and death situations where a training course, owner's manual, or fitness test isn't required. Parenting would become a privilege.

The comment that "there are just too many people" occurs more and more in conversations with diverse people about diverse situation from traffic, to pollution, to housing costs, to getting a spot at your favorite recreation site. In fact the population of Washington State is predicted to almost double within ten years. Overpopulation is on a lot of people's minds—but the concern is bucking a powerful cultural tide running the other direction. That tide is what demographers and sociologists call a pro-natalist position.

Any young woman juggling a job, a home, and debating whether or when to have a baby knows exactly what a pro-natalist attitude is. It's your parents leaning on you for a grandchild. It's your doctor looking at you funny when you're 32 and haven't had a child yet. It's your church telling you birth control is wrong and abortion is a mortal sin—and in some countries a crime as well. As long as these attitudes are so deep seated, people will hesitate to be childless. Even our equivocal attitude about celibacy may be based on mistrust or confusion about someone choosing not to have sex and children. We see it still as "unnatural." Of course, this underlies our attitudes about homosexuality as well.

As long as these attitudes permeate all the layers of our public and private lives, we are unlikely to do anything about the population problem. Public policy, sexual health practices, personal choices, all are impacted. However, this is one area of life where people as individuals have the opportunity to "think globally, act locally." If you believe there are just too many people, you can choose not to add any to the group, using whatever method fits your ethical system. The problem is that the most ethically unchallengeable system, from St. Paul to Ghandi, is abstinence—and it's also the most difficult to practice. On the other hand, technology provides us with methods that are ethically controversial but easy to use.

So the Delhi woman with the swarm of kids seems too easy a target. Quick and distant, implying the problem is someone else's behavior, someplace else. And the concept of the childless couple as "selfish" is also inappropriate. Being childless may come to be seen as one of the most selfless things a person can do.

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He dares to be a fool, and that is the
first step in the direction of wisdom.
-- James Gibbons Huneker