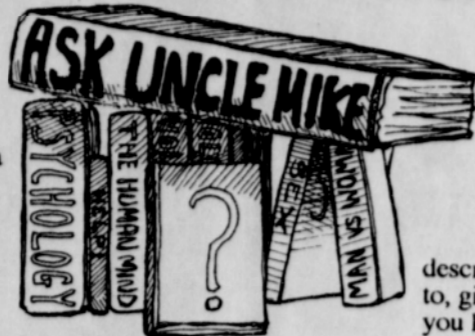


Therapy Page



Dear Uncle Mike,
Is it ever proper for a woman to open a door for a man? Whenever I do it, I get strange looks.

Cynthia S., Portland

Dear Cynthia,

Like many others before you, you've confused Uncle Mike with Miss Manners, Ann Landers or her dear sister Abby. Unlike them, Uncle Mike is studiously ignorant of etiquette: the Byzantine set of rules and rituals devised by the idle classes to make the rest of humanity feel socially challenged. Uncle Mike regards it as no accident that the word comes to us from the French, a culture that calls pancakes 'crepe', or that its literal meaning is 'ticket', as in: we have one and you don't. Etiquette-wise, even in the self-righteously egalitarian nineties, it's probably a social gaffe for you to open a door for any male not obviously infirm or disabled. It's also uncouth to use your salad fork to decorously twirl your spaghetti into the spoon you mustn't use for the soup. But then, it's hard to imagine why anyone in their right mind would care. If the spirit moves you to open the door for someone, Uncle Mike sees no reason the configuration of their reproductive hardware should enter into your decision. Of course, Uncle Mike thrives on strange looks and takes pleasure in performing those acts of consideration his mother taught him were the basis of good manners.

Dear Uncle Mike,

One of my friends is really getting on my nerves. I want to tell her off but I don't want to be rude to her. What should I do?

Anonymous, Elko, Nevada

Dear Anonymous,

As the first step in resolving any problem involving another human, Uncle Mike recommends self examination. Is there something you're do that could be unsettling to your friend? Is her behavior the only thing that's getting on your nerves? Are you being overly sensitive or judgmental about something that's not a large deal? Are you just reacting negatively to change, a favorite reaction even among those old enough to know better? If the answers are all no, you have three options: accept your friend's behavior, do something to change it, or redefine your relationship. Changing the behavior of others is a tricky business and, if what you're shooting for is positive change, you're right in assuming that telling the young woman off isn't the best approach. Uncle Mike has yet to witness a situation made better by being rude. Deal with your friend the way you'd want her to deal with you should your behavior ever run its fingernails down the blackboard of her life. People behave badly for one of two reasons: they're either afraid or they need attention. Try to understand why she's being unpleasant. Although coming right out and asking her isn't cheating, you'll learn more by trying to figure it out yourself. It's also a good reason to ask your parents or other elders what they think and to think about what they say. Remember what you like most about your friend and why you value your relationship. Tell her. Then let her know in subtle ways (by laughingly showing your fingers down your throat or tapping her forehead with an imaginary mallet) when her actions are pushing you over the edge. If she cares, she's a friend. If she doesn't, she's an acquaintance. Much depends on learning to distinguish the two.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I've been reading your column for several years now and, although I don't always agree with your advice, I very much enjoy your mind. I especially like your thoughts on quantum physics, a subject I know nothing about but am now at least interested in, and about consciousness not being subject to death. These are strange subjects to find in an advice column. You needn't answer me in print but I would be interested to know what sort of God, if any, you believe is consistent with what you know about the universe? Or do you make it a practice not to speak of such things?

Call Me Lucy, Portland, Oregon

Dear Lucy,

The only things Uncle Mike makes it a practice not to speak of are the private affairs of people who are not in the same room. Uncle Mike believes in a universe that is, beneath the bells and whistles of observed reality, a unified field: all things are one thing. What we observe is a thin membrane of object/events on an undifferentiated and unmanifest sea of probabilities. The organizing principle that transforms what might be into what is, is consciousness. Every object/event in the universe, ourselves included, is a point conscious perspective of infinite potential. This limitless possibility is the unity that rests behind the illusion of difference, like a final Burma Shave sign saying nothing: all that is, added to all that was, multiplied by all that might be. The God of quantum reality doesn't play dice. The God of quantum reality plays poker.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Maybe you can help with this problem. I would like to have a comfortable relationship with someone, but he makes it difficult. He continually makes Fervent Promises, but consistently delivers Faint Performances. He's a good guy, but his flakiness hurts. Any suggestions?

Burned

Dear Burned,

Uncle Mike sees three options: lower your own standards, persuade him to raise his, or kick the dust from your boots and ride away. Not knowing either of you, Uncle Mike has no idea what he's promising and why, how fervent his promises are, and how faint his performances might be. Being a man more than seven in dog years, he has more than a faint inkling. What you're asking him to promise are behaviors for which, after nearly a million years of social evolution, male humans have displayed absolutely no knack. They form a veritable constellation of behaviors whose visible spectrum runs from monogamy and emotional availability to taking out the garbage and giving back rubs without being asked. Without question, men would be much better persons if they were able to learn, or even admit their stupidity and wrongness, but after twenty-five years of intense consciousness raising (all dates being either before or after Ms. Magazine), the success rate remains discouraging. As Tammy Wynette put it so well, "After all, he's just a man."

Which scarcely means you shouldn't continue to bear down on him if the spirit moves you. Be the gentle ox goad that herds him to perfection. Devise a system of rewards and punishments that molds his nature more closely into what you have in mind. Women have incredible power over men, which explains the fear and suspicion men feel when they bond with them. In terms best suited to a bumper sticker, testosterone hates to lose. Whether by habit or biochemistry, men suspect that in order to be who women need them to be, they must cease to be who they are. This is, in large part, true. It's also true if you swap genders. Men fear what you fear: the loss of self. Part of what makes mating and bonding so funny is that what preserves a sense of self in one person, close emotional bonding and interdependence, decays it in the other. There being no accidents in the universe, Uncle Mike suspects we're all supposed to learn something from this. What physicists know so far is that the equation of the cosmic marriage between Emission and Absorption (the roots of the tree of good and evil) is: different and equal. You

describe your friend as a "good guy". This speaks well for his ability to, given time, grasp the fundamentals of having a relationship. Only you know whether the pearl is worth the price.

Dear Uncle Mike,

What do you think of prejudiced people? Who cares about other people's religion, culture or color? What's the main reason for people hating other people?

Maria U., Elko, Nevada

Dear Maria,

People hate what they fear and fear what they don't understand. Many of them live alone and frightened in a world so small that anything, or anyone, different is a threat. Racial and ethnic hatred is usually learned, and so, can be unlearned. Our country's population is changing from a predominantly white Anglo-Saxon culture into a multi-ethnic one. Hopefully, being thrown together more often will help us all understand how much more alike than different we are. As for what Uncle Mike thinks of prejudiced people: he hopes they feel better soon.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Just curious. As a liberal, can't-we-all-just-get-along hypocrite, what do you think of Slick Willy now? I'd love to hear you defend the slime ball. Consensual or not, Monica Lewinsky is a kid.

No Fan, Portland, Oregon

Dear No,

Uncle Mike is glad you took time from your obviously unpleasant life to scribble a few insults and half-baked opinions and send them off to him. You need all the release you can get and writing letters sure beats sitting on the porch shooting rats. To clear your confusion, Uncle Mike is not now, nor has he ever been, anyone's idea of a liberal. As a lad, he was a conservative; which is to say, very good at behaving and playing the game. As a young man, he was a radical; which is to say, an active and disruptive agent for change. Those were the days. These days, Uncle Mike is conservative radical who votes for any party endorsing the equations of quantum physics and the lyrics of Bob Dylan. This may make him a progressive.

But you were squealing and snorting about Miss Lewinsky. Uncle Mike must question your use of the term 'kid'. She is, both legally and functionally, a young woman. Like you, and here all similarities must end, Uncle Mike knows about her only what he reads in the newspapers or is force fed by cable. While filled with compassion for anyone forced to attend Beverly Hills High, Uncle Mike cannot bring himself to cast Miss Lewinsky as a young waif in a riding hood. Only in a time when everyone is a victim would anyone think to call her one. Like the rest of us, she's responsible for her actions and, even if they involve the President of the only superpower on the planet, you can't imagine how little they interest Uncle Mike. Neither are they any of his business. What does Uncle Mike think of President Clinton now? That he's done some good things for the country, sold out some things he shouldn't have, is doing the best he can, and evidently has a hard time with monogamy. The first three are matters of public concern, the last is between Mr. Clinton and his wife.

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