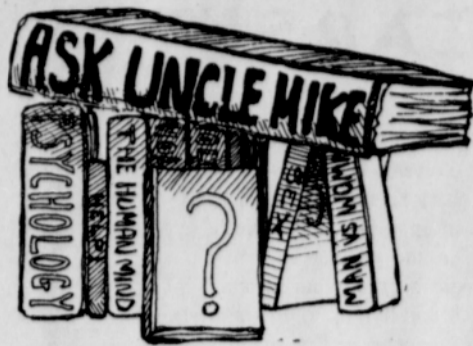


Dear Uncle Mike,

I read your column a lot and I like what you say about people's problems. Here's mine. I'm seventeen and my best friend stole my boyfriend. I couldn't believe it. Other friends told me stuff after that I didn't know. All the time she acted like my friend. I see them both a lot and it makes me mad and sad at the same time. How can people do this? How do you know before it happens?



Stephanie, Portland, Oregon

Dear Stephanie,

Aside from actually being clairvoyant, the ability to know things before they happen is the result of spending a lot of time thinking about why things happen and testing your theories against actual human behavior. This process is called experience and comes with getting older. As long, that is, as the person getting older is also getting smarter. There are, it seems to Uncle Mike, two important things to remember while wallowing in your anger and pain. First, that your best friend was no friend at all; and second, that your boyfriend was not really your boyfriend. Had he been your boyfriend, when your best friend batted her eyes, he would have made his nonintentions clear and been reaffirmed and reborn in his love for you. He didn't do that. He went for it like a hungry trout. If your best friend had been any friend at all, she would have verbally cut him to the navel at the first sign of inappropriate behavior or unethical intent. She didn't do that either.

When people have done things like this to Uncle Mike, he tries to remember two things. First, that he's been playing with people who have the moral code of diseased weasels. Second, that their loss should not, if he's thinking clearly, leave a big hole in his life. They may be the embodied spirits of a universe whose ultimate truth is the unity of all things, but they're behaving like scum bags and there's nothing that says you must stand around and smile at their low rent antics. Distance yourself from them and the feelings they encourage in you. Anger and sadness are toxic imbalances in your brain chemistry and, as chemical states, they can keep you from noticing opportunities to feel good. Then you're in a real pickle.

Which brings us to the very real and necessary fun involved in your second question: how can people do this? Understanding not only makes life more interesting, it's also the only antidote to pain and sadness; carried far enough, it always leads to compassion. One of the most charming, and most frightening, things about people is that, given the cards they've been dealt, they are, at each and every moment, doing the best they can. Once you realize the sort of fear and loneliness it would take to emotionally gut someone who trusted you, it's hard not to say, poor babies, and hope something happens soon to make them feel all better.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I've watched her show and I think there's something psychologically wrong with Martha Stewart. What do you think?

Elizabeth, Portland, Oregon

Dear Elizabeth,

Uncle Mike suspects there's something psychologically wrong with all of us. Since he doesn't know Martha (who, now that you mention it, does seem a little tightly wrapped), Uncle Mike would feel like a cad speculating on which colors are missing from her paint box. He will say that, if he and Martha were forced to winter together in any cabin smaller than Wrigley Field, there's a good chance only one of them would come out in the spring. Of course, Uncle Mike feels this way about a lot of people. It gives him the sort of charm that leads to the long periods of solitude necessary to advise others on their difficulties relating to the world around them. There may be something psychologically wrong with this. If so, it has yet to drive Uncle Mike to fuss over place settings for his poker support group.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Are you a feminist?

Becky, Seattle, Washington

Dear Becky,

Uncle Mike is a humanist who's comfortable with the notion of different but equal. If, by feminist, you mean someone who believes in equal pay for equal work and the sanctity of reproductive rights, Uncle Mike makes the cut. If you mean someone who, either through the assigning of blame or the acceptance of guilt, buys into the utter rot that women can only raise their consciousness by demeaning and belittling men and holding them personally and collectively responsible for whatever is wrong with their lives, then no, Uncle Mike is either, depending upon who's doing the labeling, a sexist swine or a knee jerk masculinist.

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