



Dear Uncle Mike,

I am seventeen (almost eighteen) and want a tattoo. My mom says "no way". My friends already are tattooed and I don't understand why it is bad. Do you have a tattoo and would you let your daughter get one?

Sophie, Portland, Oregon

Dear Sophie,

Let Uncle Mike start with the first rule: as long as you are living under your parents' roof and eating from their bowl, you are obliged to (whenever possible) act in accordance with their will. They are your parents and you are their child, end of story. There is nothing bad, or good, about a tattoo. Like everything else in life, a tattoo just is. Unlike many things in life, a tattoo isn't easy to forget. Your mother is concerned that having a tattoo will close doorways for you by putting normal people off. Bear in mind that, in ancient times (all years preceding your birth), the only people in our culture who had tattoos were sailors and ex-convicts, none of whom were women. Body art was, for her and her generation, something one marveled at in National Geographic; exotic and exciting, but not something you'd dare to bring home. As you might have guessed, parents have a tragic desire for their children to be like them. Had your mother decorated her body at your age, she'd have been shunned like a leper by good people. What, in your generation, marks you as an insider would have branded her as someone not to be taken seriously by anyone but her shipmates or those on her cell block. This is her experience. Uncle Mike knows it's not yours and suggests two paths. First, try to understand your mother's feelings. You owe that both to her and to yourself. Second, keep gently harping until she either changes her mind or you move into a group home with other doomed young freaks. Just a joke, dear. In many cases, Uncle Mike finds tattooed ladies both attractive and charming and can find no correlation between body art, intelligence, or sociopathic behavior. And, although Uncle Mike has never been hip himself, he's always cheered on those who were. No, Uncle Mike has no body art. He does, however, have a tattoo. A small, puckishly grinning devil with 'Mike' printed unskillfully beneath. He was a nineteen year old soldier in a Mexican bar. There was, he recalls, liquor and a beautiful woman involved. And a man who pulled a sewing needle taped to a popsicle stick out of his pocket and sterilized the area with tequila. When Uncle Mike woke the next morning on the beach, he had a tattoo and a hangover. The beautiful woman was gone. Although Uncle Mike seldom dwells on it, he's convinced there's a lesson there.

Dear Uncle Mike,

How do you feel about pet names? My wife says you will agree with her. Often I call her 'honey' or 'love'. She says she would prefer I call her by her name. We will agree with your thoughts. This is only a very small "riff" but sometimes fixing the small ones makes life simpler.

Mark and Diana, Seattle, Washington

Dear Mark and Diana,

Uncle Mike is afraid he could eventually strangle anyone who called him 'love'. He prefers 'Cowboy' or 'Thor, God of Thunder'. The rule with pet names is that they must please both pet and keeper. (Yes, you should think about these terms.) Expand your horizons, at least to 'Pookie', 'Sweet Cakes', or 'She Who Must Be Obeyed'. If, after sincere and determined effort on your part to re-label her, Diana still insists she's Diana, Uncle Mike recommends you listen up. Until then, your wife has Uncle Mike's permission to refer to you as 'He Who Really Should Keep in Touch'.

Dear Uncle Mike,

My boyfriend and I are planning to be married in November and have run into a roadblock in our plans. We carefully budgeted but want our day to be special. To remember we plan to videotape as well as take pictures. We have called seven photographers and not only are they expensive but six of the seven say they don't do weddings. This probably is not the kind of question you answer but, why don't 'professional' photographers do weddings? When we ask, they just say they are already too booked during the holiday season.

Eric and Sandra, Newport, Oregon

Dear Eric and Sandra,

Your question is two pronged: why are professional photographers expensive and why don't they shoot weddings? Like any professional, a photographer sets his or her fees according to two criteria: how good they are at what they do and how much the market will bear. You're lucky you're not having your wedding plumbed. People hire professional photographers because they've seen their own snapshots, just as they hire professional musicians because they've heard themselves sing and professional caterers because they couldn't make a good avocado dip if their life depended on it. Weddings cost more than studio portraits for obvious reasons. The photographer must not only deal with variables in lighting and background but with warring family factions and drunken nitwits. He or she must shoot ten or twenty rolls of film to make sure the clients and their vain and shallow guests are pleased with what they really look like. Some photographers take joy in doing this, others would sooner open a vein.

Therapy Page

Dear Uncle Mike,

Do you believe in fairies?

Jennifer, Vancouver, Washington

Dear Jennifer,

If, by fairies, you mean the objectification of elemental modes of being used by the universe to change what might be into what is, absolutely. Who could not? In the fairy faith, each element (fire, air, water and earth) has an elemental being (salamanders, sylphs, undines and gnomes). In quantum theory, there are four forces (the electromagnetic, the gravitational, the weak and the nuclear) and, on one level, four quanta whose interactions generate and are generated by them: the photon, the electron, the proton and the neutron. (There are, of course, only quarks and leptons, but we needn't go there.) If no one has ever seen an electron, and they haven't, even with the cleverest of instruments, Uncle Mike doesn't feel one bit silly believing that fairies live in the waterfall. Especially since, if you sit very quietly, they talk to you.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I'm a 28 year old woman, married without children. I am unable to have them. My husband and I have been married for just over five years. We found I couldn't have children two years ago. This is a big adjustment for both of us. I feel comfortable speaking for both of us since the two of us have talked about it at length. Communication has never been a problem with us. We love each other but a lot of the fire has died down and we're trying to decide if staying together is the best idea for either of us. I know he wants children. So do I, but I'm not ready to adopt a child now and I don't know when I will be. I'm afraid it won't be the same and he'll have resentment and I'll have guilt. Partly it's just me. My husband is a good man and I married him because I thought it would be good to have children with him and that he'd be a good father. Now that I know I'm not able to have children of my own, I'm wondering if I married the wrong man for the woman I am now. Does any of this make sense?

N.K., Eugene, Oregon

Dear N.K.,

Everything makes sense if you look at it from a certain angle. It's the angle you need to keep in mind. Uncle Mike suggests you first look at whether you believe that not being able to have a child implies you're not meant to raise one. We're usually not meant to be the things we decide we aren't. Knowing your genetic code has come to the end of the line is certainly something to mull over while sitting on the porch looking at the stars. It's not something a thoughtful person would use to deny themselves one of the more rewarding and educational experiences of life: fostering the growth of another human being, which may no longer be on your list of priorities. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, the woman you've become is the woman you were, reacting to what is. Your assignment is to understand your reaction, which will create the woman you'll be tomorrow. Given this, there is no fault, no error and no blame.

As regards the marriage you're considering tossing in the dumpster as you trot off seeking your bliss, Uncle Mike will only speak scientifically. The phenomenon you mention, the dying of the fire, corresponds to a change in the biochemistry of one's brain. It's the delicate balance between hormones and neurotransmitters (whose names, thank goodness, needn't concern us) which decides when the thrill is gone. It's nature's way of asking if our commitment was to being in love or to loving. Each of us has an answer. Some choose to go round again, some don't. Those who choose to paddle on together experience, on the good days, the sort of friendship you'd have after stoking the fires together for fifty years. On the bad days, they wonder if they wasted their lives. It's a pretty funny business.

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