



Dear Uncle Mike,

I'm interested in knowing your thoughts on everyone's obsession with building self esteem in children. As far as I can see, it means praising them for doing what was taken for granted when I was a child. (I'm fifty-two.) I have no children so I'm probably not entitled to an opinion but it doesn't seem good to make children think they're more wonderful than they are.

Kate, Portland, Oregon

Dear Kate,

Uncle Mike regards overpraising children as a form of child abuse. And, considering the rest of us who must endure the outcome, a crime against humanity. If a child is led to believe that, if you merely perform adequately, the skies will open up and a choir of adoring fans will give you a high five and take you out for pizza, the surprises life has in store for them will often be less than pleasant. If everything one does is tremendous and wonderful, what point is there in trying to do something that really is tremendous and wonderful? Or, for that matter, in even recognizing the difference. Someone, Uncle Mike can't for the life of him remember who, put it very well: "When I was young we didn't have self esteem. We had respect and you didn't get any more than you earned." How barbaric.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Please don't take this personally, but are you a woman? I know there are some sensitive men out there but sometimes you stretch the imagination. I promise not to tell.

Stephanie, New Rochelle, New York

Dear Stephanie,

Oh alright, as long as you promise.

Sorry, dear, but having resolved many identity issues more subtle than this, Uncle Mike can say with a degree of certainty approaching the absolute that he is not now, nor can he remember ever having been, a woman. And, to save you a stamp, the answer is no: Uncle Mike is heterosexual. Often embarrassingly so. Oh, the stories he could tell; and, were he a woman, probably would.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I would like to ask you a question I ask a lot: what is your recipe for finding happiness?

Aaron, Sausalito, California

Dear Aaron,

It's pretty complicated. As much as possible, Uncle Mike does things that make him happy and, as much as possible, doesn't do things that make him unhappy. Because pleasure feels good and pain doesn't, Uncle Mike seeks pleasure with a persistence one click shy of religious fervor. The tricky part for him has been learning the difference between pleasure and excitement.

Uncle Mike takes great pleasure in reducing matters to simplest terms, if only because it increases his chances of understanding what he's doing. (Understanding what you're doing is itself a great, and much neglected, source of pleasure.) For Uncle Mike, a sense of place was crucial. What is the world and why does it do what it does? After looking at the various descriptions of reality trotted out by various belief systems, Uncle Mike decided that quantum theory and relativity made the most sense. They're also the most beautiful. In Uncle Mike's universe, everything that is, is the most appropriate object or event that could be. It may not always seem like the best of all possible worlds, but it's the only one that could be, given everything that's gone before. Our actions change the world we perceive and our perceptions of the world change our actions. (This may have been what Abe Lincoln had in mind when he observed that people are about as happy as they decide to be.) Uncle Mike is a firm believer in free will and snorts at the notion that any of us are victims of anything but our own decisions.

Getting back to happiness: through much painful research, Uncle Mike has discovered that, whenever he's unhappy, he's either in an inappropriate place, engaging with inappropriate people, or doing inappropriate things. Often all three. If his karma has led him to an inappropriate place where he must deal with inappropriate people, he tries to behave appropriately. While this often means leaving and not returning calls, it can also provide an opportunity to change matters by dealing with difficult circumstances in ways that benefit all concerned. When it comes to models for appropriate behavior, Uncle Mike's long time favorite is, or are, the seven deadly sins. Stop groaning. They're called the seven deadly sins because wallowing in them strangles the spirit and makes your life miserable. Say them aloud, write them down and tape them on the refrigerator of your mind: pride, anger, lust, envy, greed, gluttony and sloth. Indulge these and discover pain and sadness.

Getting back to simplest terms, the seven deadly sins can be boiled down to the three big mistakes: craving, grasping and striving. (Sounds like a law firm, doesn't it?) For Uncle Mike, the surest ways to be unhappy are to want what we don't have, to try to hold on to anything that will change or go away (and what won't, including ourselves?), or to have any mission other than to be who and where we are.

Dear Uncle Mike,

For my son's eighteenth birthday, his girlfriend who is seventeen, sent him a provocative studio photograph of herself in a teddy. You know the sort. He now has it on his dresser. I am furious and am considering calling her parents to let her know how inappropriate I think her gift is. I have half a mind to box the thing up and send it back. She seemed like a nice girl and I am shocked beyond words.

A Mother, Seattle, Washington

Dear Mother,

Although Uncle Mike did not notice a question in your rabid little screed, he'll address what seems to be your major concern: that your son and his young friend have a healthy interest in sex. Considering the alternatives (having no interest in sex or an exaggerated concern for the sex lives of others), matters could be worse. And they'll get that way quickly if you confiscate your son's birthday gift and treat his friend like the whore of Babylon. If she was a nice girl before she posed in her pajamas, doing so probably has not turned her into a dangerous trollop who'll lead your son to ruin. Uncle Mike assumes both you and they have read the instructions on the condom box. If not, now's a real good time.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I pick up the Upper Left Edge in Portland just to read your column. I have to say I am in love. You are the kind of guy, from your writing, that I have always wished for. I suspect you write the horoscopes too as they are written with the same streak of good spirit and common sense. I admire your common sense and great wit, sense of humor and of course intelligence.

I don't suppose I would be so lucky as to find you single, unattached, and dying to send me a romantic E-mail. Perhaps you could throw in a bonus and be a stocky, brown-eyed, easy-going guy with a dog besides. See how I push my luck?

Vicky, on-line

Dear Vicky,

Thank you so much for writing. Uncle Mike is happy to hear you're in love. Knowing himself as he does, he's a little concerned about your taste; but then, he's concerned about a lot of things. Not as many as before he came to the institution, but still more than enough. Without honesty, Vicky, we have nothing. Uncle Mike is not a stocky, brown-eyed, easy-going guy with a dog besides. If only. (The years in the jungle changed many things, not all of them for the better.) As for the dog besides, Uncle Mike loves dogs and has lived with one or more of them most of his life. The kangaroo changed all of that. Kangaroos change many things.

Death is a low chemical trick played on everybody except sequoia trees.  
J.J. Furnas

# THE THERAPY PAGE

Dear Uncle Mike,

Would you mind going over once again what you do when you get dumped? My boyfriend split from me three weeks ago and my friends say if I don't snap out of it they're going to euthanize me. I'm twenty-four and have been through this before but it's harder this time because I really, really cared about this person. He says it's him and not me but my self esteem is real down and I cry a lot. I know I'll meet somebody and be in love again, I'm not stupid. I would just like to learn to be able to get in control of my emotions. Any words of wisdom to get me through the night?

Amber, Portland, Oregon

Dear Amber,

In Uncle Mike's experience, the best way to get through the night is to sleep. As much as possible, leave the pain alone. Do not, under any circumstances, imagine yourself to be a victim. You fell in love, it didn't work out. You wanted one thing and your lover wanted another. The magic you made was lovely but it's over. No fault, no error, no blame. Love is eternal, lovers often aren't.

The nasty thing about wallowing in loss, aside from making you tedious to your friends, is that it blinds you to reality. It's doubtful that the universe came into being in order to make you suffer. The Dalai Lama, whose opinion Uncle Mike is inclined to trust, believes the goal of all sentient beings is to be happy. The art of happiness does not involve emotionally disemboweling ourselves over something or someone who's no longer there. If it's not with you, it's not yours; if it's not yours, why grieve because it's not with you? The life well lived involves celebrating what is, not what isn't. In order to celebrate it, you need to notice it; a level of awareness not often achieved while shuffling around the apartment in our bathrobe.

Emotions are biochemical brain states, some of them toxic, all of them resistant to change. Being sad is one thing, being a sad person is another. The difference between the two involves understanding and the only cure for ingrown emotions is clear thinking. Slap yourself around a little, dear. Count your blessings. We never lose anything we really need and if this young man is gone, both of you are better for it. You had some good times, you had some bad times. You learned something from each other, you gave and you received. What more, exactly, did you expect? What else, exactly, do you need? Your heart is broken. Okay. It wouldn't be a heart if it couldn't be. The trick is to love without lust for result; to love without imagining we can possess another human being or that we know much of anything about the future.

All that we have, now and forever, is the present. This moment. This. Maybe the bumpersticker is wrong and it's not the first day of the rest of our lives. Maybe it's our last day on the planet. Will everyone who wants to spend it moping over the past and picking at scabs please raise their hand? Find something to do that makes you feel good and do it over and over again.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Are you as perfect as you sound? If so, would you consider a long weekend of debauchery in San Francisco?

Kate, San Francisco, California

Dear Kate,

Uncle Mike has no idea how perfect he sounds but is painfully aware of how perfect he's not. While even a short weekend of debauchery with a woman of obvious taste and refinement sounds like just the ticket, his day nurse refuses even to speak of another field trip after what happened in Tacoma. She's probably right. Perhaps you could come here and we could make things out of clay in the visiting room.

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