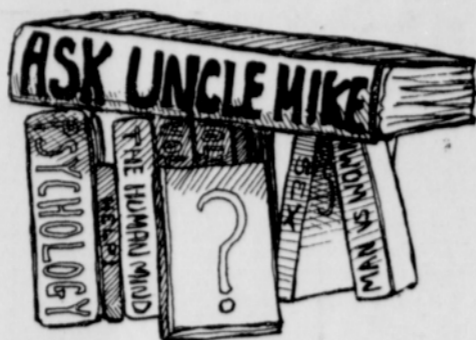


Dear Uncle Mike,

After spending all my young adult years working at jobs that were meaningless to me for bosses who were idiots with power, I knew I had to pursue my "right work." I have been doing that for a few years now but it has meant earning far less money and not having medical insurance. During the first years particularly, my friends often had to come to my rescue when I couldn't make ends meet, giving me side work, loans, gifts and support in general.

I have tried to keep up with paybacks and they know I don't take them for granted and love and appreciate them dearly and would do anything I can for them as long as we all shall live. I have no regrets about my choice in career. But in discussions about this topic, some people have speculated that in a way it isn't fair that, out of love for me, friends are bound to help when necessary to enable me to pursue a meaningful life and lifestyle, when at the same time they are biting the bullet and going to their nine to five jobs and punching time cards so they can be secure financially even though they hate their jobs. Am I being selfish on this?

Free Bea



# THERAPY PAGE

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Dear Free,

At the risk of sounding like a bumper sticker, Uncle Mike would remind you and your friends that we all have choices to make and, in every circumstance, choose to do what makes us feel good; which, in most cases, means as good as we can. You speak of those who bite the bullet. There are many bullets to bite and yours is neither softer nor tastier than the one that comes with a health plan and retirement benefits. Some people decide that punching a clock and enduring often meaningless work in the company of idiots, suck-ups, hopeless neurotics and outright scoundrels is worth the security of knowing the rent will be paid, there'll be meals not involving top ramen and the bypass surgery or chemotherapy (the needs for which are greatly increased by spending too much time in the company of idiots, suck-up, neurotics and outright scoundrels) will be taken care of by an insurance company that fervently hopes you'll die before you become a liability.

At the risk of sounding like a bean counter, we choose our path according to our personal cost/benefit equation. In our hearts, we all believe what the Dalai Lama believes: that the goal and purpose of life is happiness. Not the pursuit of happiness, but happiness itself. As often as possible, we need to grab ourselves by the lapels and ask if what we're doing is making us happy. If the answer is 'no' more times than it's 'yes', there's reason to suspect the path we've chosen has no heart; that it may be a good path but it's not our path. Leading a fiscally responsible life is a path as noble and illuminating as any other and, since all paths are one path and there's really only one mountain, the sole consideration is how what we're doing feels, how well it fits with who we are and where we're going.

You do not mention the sort of "right work" you do. If it doesn't involve some sort of elaborate rationalization for sloth and self indulgence, you're not being selfish. If what you do adds to the total of happiness in the world, you're merely underpaid, not underemployed. None of us are made happy by being in need and right work depends upon self reliance. If you borrow, you repay as soon as you can in whatever way you can and avoid borrowing from anyone who squints when you ask. Friends don't help because they're bound to; they help because they're able and willing to, and because helping people they have faith in makes them feel better about their own path. No one gets through this or any other life alone and, in terms of the human spirit, cash flow boils down to one principle: accept everything that's offered and give everything you have. If it's a good deal, everyone gets up from the table smiling.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I have been separated from my wife for two months, we are getting divorced after thirteen years of sheer incompatibility. Recently on the Internet, I met a woman who sounds perfect after countless conversations, exchanges of pictures (we haven't met in person yet) and e-mails. We feel that we love each other and though it sounds hasty, I am ready to invite her to move into my house. My mother says don't make any decisions until I take a road trip with her but I think I can tell everything I need to know about her from all the phone conversations. Do you think this is crazy?

Rick

Dear Rick,

Interesting word, crazy. If, by crazy, you mean irrational, then yes, you seem a little unbalanced; but then, falling in love has nothing to do with rationality and it's first test is whether or not it unbalances you. Uncle Mike squirms a little that you'd think to invite someone you've never met to move into your home and would encourage you to consider the possibility that a heady mix of newfound freedom and long term loneliness might be subtly, or not so subtly, influencing your judgment. Uncle Mike thinks you should be a man and listen to your mother. No one knows anyone until they've taken a road trip together.

The government deficit is the difference between the amount of money the government spends and the amount it has the nerve to collect. Sam Ewing



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Who says Jack Nicholson is a hero?

By Alison Clement

There's more to waiting tables than you might think. It takes courage, for one thing. You walk up to a table, and everyone turns to look at you. They wait, like they're waiting for the opening line of a play.

You have to look happy all the time and that's a big strain. You have to look happy, but concerned, bending forward while they talk, listening carefully, asking: ranch or thousand island? You have to act like you believe in yourself. You know what you're doing. Everything is going according to a plan that you know about, even if it isn't apparent to them. You can't think of all the things going wrong in the kitchen. You have to remember: gin and tonic to Table 8; fish bone in the throat Table 3; man at 12 late for a meeting; nut allergy on 5. You have to remember it all and not get bogged down.

Each table is a clean slate and a chance for things to go right. You can't think of what you've done wrong, what you might do wrong, what you might forget, all the mistakes you've made or could make. You've got to have a clear mind.

You have to time the food so no one has to wait too long, but they don't have to hurry up either. You have to get the right food to the right people and you can't spill or drop any plates and you have to remember to give everybody coffee and ketchup and Tabasco and all the things they forgot to ask for the first time, when you were writing it down.

You have to keep busy, when you're a waitress, and you can't forget anybody and you can't point out that you're busy, that you only have two hands, that they are not the only customers in the restaurant. And you have to do it all with a smile on your face: Yessir!

They all want to be special and they all want something different. They're in a hurry, or they're taking their time. They're falling in love or they're getting a divorce and, either way, they haven't touched their dessert. They want you to joke with them or they want you to leave them alone, goddamn it.

You've got to figure out what they want and then give it to them, without seeming to worry. They want you to care, but you must not worry. If they notice you worrying, they'll think you're spineless and there's nothing they hate like a spineless waitress. They'll jump on her every time and then walk out without tipping.

They'd jump on you anyway, at The Pyramid Cafe. They'd jump on you because the tables were dirty, because the food didn't come or, when it did, it smelled bad, it tasted funny, the fish was still frozen in the middle and hadn't I told them it was fresh?

"Fresh frozen," I'd say. But the customers were never impressed by the fact that we served fish that had, at one time, been fresh.

They wanted to special order, when the menu clearly said NO SUBSTITUTIONS. They think they're Jack Nicholson all of a sudden, trying to get a tuna salad sandwich. They think they're a hero. They don't think of the waitress in her little tennis shoes getting varicose veins so some guy can eat a tuna salad when we've already moved on to the dinner menu.

They thought of the cool, green pyramid outside that promised something different. They sat in their orange plastic booths and remembered the Chinese place they had driven past, down the street, and thinking up ways to punish me for their bad judgment.

This is an excerpt from a novel in progress, and she has been given a grant to finish it. No it wasn't enough. If you want to read more of this woman's work you can go to [www.leftedgesuzy.com](http://www.leftedgesuzy.com) or you could just send her money.

The past always looks better than it was; it's only pleasant because it isn't here. Finely Peter Dunne

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