

Dear Uncle Mike,

You've probably been asked this question before but would you give me some advice on how to deal with gossips? I have a good friend who I love dearly but she insists on telling me juicy nuggets about people we both know. Most of the time, it's in a good spirit but sometimes it's information I neither want nor need to know. What does Uncle Mike do in this situation?

Diane

Dear Diane,

Uncle Mike tells them it's information he neither needs nor wants to know. Of the many mysteries he confronts each day, none is deeper than the obsession some humans have with the affairs of others. Gossip, you might remind your friend, is story telling. What people do with their lives is splendid subject matter but, without fail, the stories are better told and more entertaining when not cluttered up with names. Uncle Mike tries never to say anything about anyone he wouldn't say if they were in the room. The practice has, if nothing else, made him a better listener.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I have one of your books and there are two letters in it about relationships between young women and older men. You sound like you've been there and done that. I'm a twenty-six year old woman who's interested in a fifty year old man. Until it happened, I thought that was weird. We've known each other for a month and have socialized with coworkers. I think he's interested in me but he doesn't act on it. I don't know if I'm misreading him or not. I think I'm being pretty obvious that I'd accept an invitation if it was offered. Any advice for me? Should I ask him out?

Annie

Dear Annie,

Interesting word, should. You should do what it's in everyone's best interests that you do. It wouldn't be unusual for a man of fifty to, when confronted with a twenty-six year old woman who might just be being friendly, do his level best not to make an ass of himself and behave like a bad cliché. For this reason, you should probably ask if he'd like to meet for a nosh after work. You're right: Uncle Mike has danced this dance. Here's what he learned about young women and older men. The young woman will eventually need to go somewhere the older man cannot or will not go. You have no idea how important it is that everyone understands this. The ends of things are in their beginnings, waving hello and goodbye. No fault, no error, no blame. In between, it'll be whatever you make it. Knowing your time together is limited can make the time you have a thing of great value. Who was it who said, knowing you're going to be hanged in a week focuses the mind wonderfully?

Dear Uncle Mike,

Do you believe in God? I don't know if I do or not and want to know what you think about it. Some of my friends are real religious and go to church and they want me to go with them. The times I went I didn't like it much. I wasn't comfortable and didn't know the songs or what I was supposed to do. Some other of my friends are like pagans and into wicca(?) and magic. Some of it's good but some of it's weird and my religious friends say they're going to go to hell. Do you believe in heaven and hell? I'm getting pretty messed up over this. Thanks.

Deanna

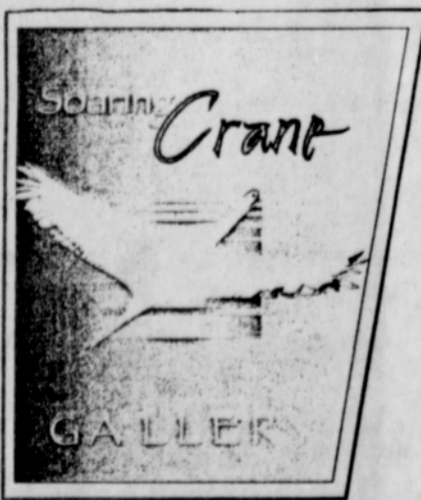
Dear Deanna,

Uncle Mike would suggest you not worry about it. The world in general is pretty messed up over religion. Does Uncle Mike believe in God? No, not if you mean some bearded white guy who watches us like a hawk, never laughs and punishes us if we don't know the songs. Uncle Mike believes that for God to be God, God (not He or She) must be everything. Uncle Mike believes in a universe in which all things are one thing, everything is alive and everything is on its own path of becoming. There are no wrong paths; but there are paths that lead to pain and sadness and paths that lead to happiness. Uncle Mike regards any religion that discourages the spread of happiness as an organized crime against humanity.

There's nothing wrong with being uncomfortable in church. When the priests scolded Jesus for not worshipping in the House of God, Jesus asked them to show him a place where God does not dwell. It's probably no accident the teacher from Galilee spent a lot of time in the wilderness. Does Uncle Mike believe in heaven and hell? No, Uncle Mike believes in cause and effect: love and be loved, hate and be hated. As Omar Khayyam, the Persian mystic poet, put it: "Heaven but the image of fulfilled desire, hell the shadow of a soul on fire." Uncle Mike sees no evidence that the future exists and so tries to do his best in the present. This never includes imagining that those who believe differently will spend eternity roasting on a spit. Uncle Mike regards this as way weird.

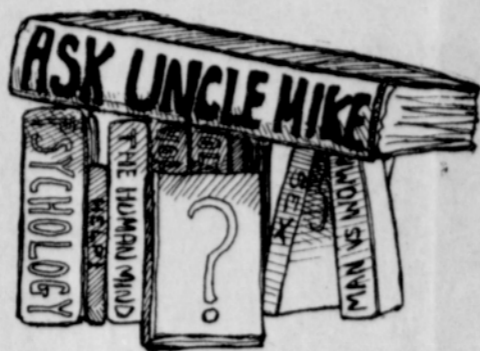
Uncle Mike recommends you keep your eyes and ears open, question all authority, find something to have faith in and actively have faith in it. Uncle Mike has faith in love, laughter and life. This may make him a pagan. He doesn't go to their meetings either.

"People will sometimes forgive you the good you have done them, but seldom the harm they have done to you."
Somerset Maugham



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"It is a mistake to believe that science consists in nothing but conclusively proved propositions, and it is unjust to demand that it should. It is a demand only made by those who feel a craving for authority in some form and a need to replace the religious catechism by something else, even if it be a scientific one." Sigmund Freud



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Seated on a summer dune last week, someone very close asked what I read and favored. This is a partial answer, a short list of readings dear to me. I would like to dedicate my column this month to her.

Crowfoot, on his deathbed, 1891:

"What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the winter time. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the Sunset."

H. Rider Haggard, Allan Quatermain, similarly:

"As the breath of the oxen in winter, as the quick star that runs along the sky, as a little shadow that loses itself at sunset, as I once heard a Zulu called Ignosi put it, such is the order of our life, the order that passeth away."

W.B. Yeats:

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But, I being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Theodore Roethke, "Meditation at Oyster River":

In this hour,
In this first heaven of knowing,
The flesh takes on the pure poise of the spirit,
Acquires, for a time, the sandpiper's insouciance,
The hummingbird's surety, the kingfisher's cunning.

Mary Oliver, "In the Pinewoods, Crows and Owl":

Great bumble. Sleek
slicer. How the crows
dream of you, caught at last
in their black beaks. Dream of you
leaking your life away. Your wings
crumbling like old bark. Feathers
falling from your breast like leaves,
and your eyes two bolts
of lightning gone to sleep.

Nikos Kazantzakis, Report to Greco:

I collect my tools: sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing,
intellect. Night has fallen, the day's work is done. I return
like a mole to my home, the ground. Not because I am tired
and cannot work. I am not tired. But the sun has set.

Pablo Neruda, "Night on the Island":

All night I have slept with you
next to the sea, on the island.
Wild and sweet you were between pleasure and sleep,
between fire and water.
Perhaps very late
our dreams joined
at the top or at the bottom,
up above like branches moved by a common wind,
down below like red roots that touch.

Joyce Cary, The Horse's Mouth:

I was walking by the Thames. Half-past morning on an
autumn day. Sun in a mist. Like an orange in a fried fish
shop. All bright below. Low tide, dusty water and a crooked
bar of straw, chicken-boxes, dirt and oil from mud to mud.
Like a viper swimming in skim milk. The old serpent,
symbol of nature and love.

Five windows light the caverned man: through one he
breathes the air;
Through one hears music of the spheres; through one can
can look
And see small portions of the eternal world.

Cormac McCarthy, Suttree:

Peering down into the water where the morning sun
fashioned wheels of light, coronets fanwise in which lay
trapped each twig, each grain of sediment, long flakes and
blades of light in the dusty water sliding away like optic
strokes where motes shifted and spun. A hand trails over the
gunwale and he lies athwart the skiff, the toe of one sneaker
plucking periodic dimples in the river with the boat's slight
cradling, drifting down beneath the bridge and slowly past the
mud-stained stanchions.

Louis De Bernieres, Corelli's Mandolin:

Mandras sat passively as his mother ardently and
disapprovingly cut away the ropes and pads of his head and
beard. She tutted and grimaced at every glimpse of a louse,
and carried away the rank locks in the blades of the scissors
that they and their cargo of nits could burn foully in the
charcoal of the brazier, shrivelling and spitting, releasing a
thick and stinking smoke vile enough to banish demons and
disturb the dead.

***All these works are fine specifics against that
contemporary scourge, that demon plague, television. Ingest
pieces of literature daily until the madness subsides and the
spirit and brain pan heal.

Professor Lindsey