

Tiptoeing Forward to Seventy

by

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Any day now, I'll be 70. I know that's not the end of the world, or even of my life, but it is old. Not really-really old, but old.

After listening to my musings about the pleasure and difficulty of becoming 70 in my typically melancholy way, a woman I've known for decades tells me: "It's time you broaden your horizons." I wait for her to go on, but she just looks at me expectantly.

Squaring my shoulders, I reply, "What's wrong with my horizons? I like them just the way they are, thank you." When she doesn't answer, I ask, "What exactly are you talking about? Do you want me to learn to tap dance or something?" This last is said with all the sarcasm I can muster.

"You need to start dating," she replies firmly.

"We're changing the subject right now," I say, "and I'm not kidding."

But later that same evening, I begin to wonder if my friend might be right: I have been single for many years, and even though I like living this way, a change might be interesting. With this in mind, I decide I'll check out the internet dating sites. Why not?

I start my research. While each singles site is somewhat different, there is a template for this process. First, you have to click the links that define what kind of person you want and who you are. These are called the deal breakers. Yes, that's what they are called.

What are my deal breakers? Well, I would prefer a woman. I don't want her to smoke. Not cigarettes anyhow. She has to be well-educated and leftist in her politics. I would like her to be within a 50-mile radius. I begin to worry that the deal-breaker categories are getting too long. I am not in a position to be so categorical; there aren't many 70-somethings looking for love online.

It appears I'm not flexible about much. I don't want to live together, and I want somebody tall. (I used to be 6' but seem to have shrunk to 5'11".) I review my categories. Ethnicity? I check don't care. Hair, eyes, body type, don't care. Religion, I check don't care. Actually I do care but decide to wait and see. Can I even imagine having a relationship with a religious fundamentalist? Would a fundamentalist want to have a relationship with me, a cranky political Jew? I'll wait and see on religion.

Some of the sites have tests that tell you what kind of person you are. They require comparing shapes and other Rorschachian tests. I emerge from that visual gauntlet defined as a negotiator/innovator. Like the weekly horoscope, I think, well . . . maybe. But I like being identified this way. It takes some of the sting out of all my deal-breaker categories and makes me seem more flexible, openhearted, and fun-loving than I am.

Joining four sites, I fill out personal profiles, making each a bit different since I figure they attract different women. A little more intellectual emphasis in one. Political activism highlighted in another. Emphasizing my friendship community in a third. I use the same photograph with all of them but create different "handles" to identify myself.

By now, I have read hundreds of profiles online to get a sense of how women describe themselves. Most are crowded with descriptive adjectives, yet they are completely opaque. Warm yet private. Outgoing but needs solitude. Reads but loves to play games. I settle on generic, warm, and only mildly truthful language: I call myself a friendly political radical. Warm disrupter of the state?

There are several levels of suggested contact that are part of this process. After a woman sees your profile, she can either (depending on the site) electronically wink or smile at you. This expresses interest, but it doesn't require the interested person to make actual contact. On the cheaper sites, one is able to ignore the winking and smiling, but on the more costly ones, there is a link that says "Thanks, but not interested." With higher fees comes a bit of courtesy.

Once my profile is online, I am winked and smiled at dozens of times by a wide range of potential matches. A European woman wants to correspond. A newly divorced woman seeks someone to "gently bring her out." A woman in her late 60s spends two sentences of her allotted profile space assuring the viewer/reader that she looks younger than her years and prefers younger women as well. Then why is she writing to me, I wonder? Many of these winkers and smilers seem too good to be true. How many people do you know who are playful, funny, intelligent, healthy, religious (or spiritual, a different category), adventurous, love opera, country and western, and have recently taken up woodworking as a new hobby?

I am beginning to suspect that I should revise my profile, just tell the truth and save everyone concerned a lot of time. I am, as I said before, a cranky political Jew. I am bossy, although I don't mean to be, and I am opinionated. I don't really exercise 4 to 5 times a week, although each week I mean to. I make little exhalations each time I sit down and get up, and I have to push down harder now when I get up. I wear hearing aids, and when they become loose, I have to poke my fingers into my ears and press them back in—which, if you don't know what I am doing, must look like a demented tic.

I no longer order salads in restaurants with people I don't know since the lettuce tucks itself between my teeth and stays there. I can't see myself picking my teeth on a date. Then there is the added problem of the sound level of cafes. It would be very unromantic to keep interrupting with "What?" "Sorry, didn't hear you," or "Boy, it's loud in here." So I'm uncertain about where to meet. What with my periodontal pockets and the typical sound level, restaurants are not the first choice.

Perhaps a walk would be better. But walking may mean something different to a prospective date than it does to me. It could be A Walk, involving hilly terrain, a good deal of speed, even sweating and grunting. Given the arthritis that has blossomed in my left knee and threatens to make significant inroads in my right one, I decide to omit this from my profile. Strolling along a flat surface would be much closer to the truth. Sitting down in a quiet place and having a deep conversation would be the absolute truth.

Then there is the matter of my photograph. Some of the more expensive sites allow multiple ones, but the choice of the primary image requires clarity about how I want to be seen. Warm and smiling? Earnest and studious? At a political rally? Celebration? At my desk? Piano? Just a standard head shot with no context at all? I look through my available photographs, checking to see if my neck is wrinkled and if I remembered to elevate my chin at the moment the flash went off. I settle on a standard smiling headshot, one with a moderately smooth neck. Then a second shot of me sitting on the beach, happy, hair looking particularly good as it blows in the wind, although my breasts seem to be nestled somewhere near my waist since I'm wearing my beach bra, the really comfy, loose one. I hesitate about the breast thing for a bit and decide that bodies—hers and mine—aren't that important. That is, unless she's a foot shorter than I am.

Soon after I get myself online, I see a perfect woman, or at least one who is almost perfect. Right age, education, politics, even height. I think to myself that this is easy. Why did I wait so long to enter the online world? I send what I think of as a warmly effusive email to this nearly perfect woman. Brief but charming, I think. After noting all our points of connection and interest, I propose we meet for coffee. Pleased with myself and the alignment of the dating tooth fairies, I wait for her response.

The first day I check my emails every couple of hours, the second day at fifteen minute intervals. On the third day I begin to tell myself that this woman must have gone on an already-planned trip after she put her profile online. If she had seen my response before she left, she certainly would have been as delighted as I was to find her, and she

would have responded at once. By the fourth day, the story has changed: it now is about the callous and unkind woman who put her profile online and didn't even bother to respond to a woman who, if she had only stopped to think about it, was a good prospect. By the fifth day, I am beginning to suspect that this process is going to be more complicated than I had thought.

I am drowning in a sea of smiles and winks from all the wrong people. My response is to add a revised profile to a new site, hoping that the women there will be more—something.

After a while it works. I get a haircut (that draws attention from my neck) and start to respond to the women who are interested in me. Each week I have a handful of breakfast dates—pancakes and eggs are not foods that stick in my teeth. One woman wants a life partner right away. Another wants to share her horse farm with the right woman. Another has just broken up from a 20-year relationship and wants to make new "friends," although the glint in her eye belies the "friendliness" of her interest. Another is an old hippie. Then an old ardent (read rigid) Marxist.

Driving home from these breakfasts, where I inevitably overeat, I try to invoke my spiritual practice, wavering though it is. Be compassionate to yourself, I silently intone. And to each of these women reaching out for love. Be patient, loving, openhearted, and kind in your assessment of them, yourself, and this process. Repeat five times and breathe.

Who knows? Maybe when I get home and open my web browser, there will be a smile or a wink from the right, even the perfect woman.