

Be Your Own
Dating Service



Be Your Own Dating Service

*A Step-by-Step Guide to
Finding and Maintaining Healthy Relationships*



Nina Atwood

AN OWL BOOK
Henry Holt and Company
New York

*This book is dedicated
to the memory of my mother, Jean Alden,
with gratitude for her example of
unconditional love.*



Owl Books
Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10010
www.henryholt.com

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Distributed in Canada by H. B. Fenn and Company Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Atwood, Nina.

Be your own dating service: a step-by-step guide to finding
and maintaining healthy relationships / Nina Atwood. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

“An Owl book.”

ISBN-13: 978-0-8050-4097-5

ISBN-10: 0-8050-4097-8

1. Dating (Social customs) 2. Man-woman relationships.
I. Title.

HQ801.A8255 1996
646.77—dc20

95-22964
CIP

Henry Holt books are available for special promotions and
premiums. For details contact: Director, Special Markets.

First Edition 1996

Designed by Paula Russell Szafranski

Printed in the United States of America

15 17 19 20 18 16

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Introduction



Welcome to the world of modern dating! Whether you're newly divorced or you've been single for years, you've no doubt discovered the challenges of finding the right partner and creating a healthy, lasting relationship.

As a single person myself, I am acutely aware of how difficult this is. When I first conceived of writing a book like this, I began my research as much for myself as for my clients and future readers. I, too, wanted to know how to make dating a more rewarding experience and move myself closer to a healthy relationship.

Whenever I talk to groups of singles and field their questions, I hear the same ones over and over:

“Where are all the nice people to date? Where do you go to meet the right people?” and “Why is love so hard to find? Why are relationships so difficult?”

These questions reveal the problems that singles have in today's dating scene:

1. Not enough choice—the sense that there aren't enough people to choose from.

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2. When we do meet someone new, we move too quickly into a relationship without a proper assessment of what the possibility is, and without good boundaries. Thus:

3. We get our hearts broken, often unnecessarily; we get discouraged, become cynical, and withdraw from the dating scene, sometimes for months or years, sometimes permanently, or,

4. We stay too long with the wrong partners, fearful of never finding anything better.

Given all the challenges, it's amazing that so many of us hang in there and continue to play the dating game. We do this for one simple reason: *the drive to connect in a meaningful way with a romantic partner is very powerful and not to be denied*. We try and try again, even though the problems sometimes seem insurmountable.

After a few years of being single, we begin to feel the urgent need for solutions. We go to workshops, we buy self-help books, we even go into therapy. We join dating services, thinking that this will be the answer.

Dating services provide introductions to other singles, but they do nothing to help us understand how to create good relationships. Most self-help books for singles offer advice on attracting and winning over partners, which is fine as long as you're content with just any old relationship.

If you're like me and like the singles I talk to and work with, you want more than that: *You want a compatible partner with whom you can create a loving, healthy, lifetime relationship*. This means that you'll need more than just tips on meeting, flirting, and winning people over.

This book is about healthy relationships and how to create them from the beginning. I view single life as an incredible opportunity: the perfect time to step back, take a new look at how we're going about the dating game, and learn about relationships *prior to getting into one*. Being single can be a powerful intervention point in getting the kind of healthy love we want.

This book offers solutions, but not with a particular result in mind. Instead of recipes for attracting and winning over a desired

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partner, this book provides steps that lay the foundation for healthy relationships.

Instead of an answer book, this book is more like an exercise book. Rather than saying, “Do this, do that, and you’ll get the person you want,” this book says, “Practice this, practice that, and you’ll know yourself better, create a more rewarding life, and move yourself closer to a healthy love relationship in the process.”

This book is actually a philosophy of dating designed to empower singles in their search for the right partner, so that they: 1) have more choices; 2) make better choices; and 3) thereby create healthier relationships that have a good chance of lasting. It doesn’t offer any guarantees or magical solutions.

Instead, this book asks you to look at how you’re going about the dating game, to examine your attitudes and views, and to make changes at the very heart of your approach to finding a partner. You will design and create your own personal “Dating Game Plan,” customized to fit your personality, your needs, and your lifestyle. You will make a new assessment of what kind of partner you’re looking for. Most important, you’ll have the opportunity to use this plan for your own personal growth in every area of your life and in all your relationships.

Part I

Your Dating Game Plan



1



Love Myths, the Reality, and the Challenge of Love

Once upon a time, there was a princess . . . well, she wasn't really a princess, but she thought of herself as one. She was, after all, waiting for a prince to come and take her away from her boring life.

Day after day, the princess dreamed of the beautiful life she would have with her prince. He would be tall and handsome, strong and brave, yet sensitive to her every emotional need. They would live in a castle (or a very large suburban home) and do romantic stuff every day.

Because she was attractive, many suitors came to see if they could win her hand, or something else. Some of them wanted merely to gaze into her eyes and yearn secretly for her. Some wanted a good time but no commitment. Some wanted a relationship, but since they weren't handsome princes, she turned those away.

The princess was frustrated and complained daily, "I just never meet anyone I'm interested in. There just aren't any handsome princes out there anymore. What can I do?"

Finally, the princess got tired of waiting for her prince, so one day she decided to go out and look for him.

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First she went to a bar where a lot of men hung out. But she didn't find any princes there, only a lot of married men, alcoholics, and more of those no-commitment types. Then she tried the personal ads, but that didn't go anywhere.

Finally, she decided that as long as she was out, she might as well do something she enjoyed. She went to a big art show, where she got to see her favorite artists' work. While she was there she met some new people and made some friends. Later, she went to a big dance where she had lots of fun and made some more friends. The next day, she found more fun things to do and made more friends.

After a while the princess forgot about finding her prince. She was having too much fun with her new friends, and her dreams of a perfect life in a castle began to seem less important. She became a lot more outgoing, and she noticed that the kind of men she used to like now seemed rather boring.

The princess began having more dates but found that she was no longer so worried about finding the perfect Prince Charming. Instead, she chatted about her life and her new interests and took the time to get to know the man she was out with. She quickly moved on from the no-commitment type because they didn't fit into her new life very well.

One day while the princess was taking a photography class she noticed a guy who was not a prince but looked interesting. She noticed that he noticed her. After class they talked and then they went for a cup of coffee. A few days later they had lunch, and later that week they had dinner together. She found out that they cared about a lot of the same things, like children being happy and having good relationships with friends. They talked a lot, laughed a lot, and held hands. Sometimes they got mad and had it out, and sometimes they cried. But they tried to always speak from their hearts.

Later, they discovered that they loved each other and decided to stay together. The princess realized that she hadn't felt bored in a long time and that having someone to love and be loved by was a lot better than having a prince. She threw away her tiara, and the two lovers got married.

Fairy-Tale Love and Romantic Love Myths

This story was written like a fable because it seemed appropriate. After all, so much of what we perceive to be true about romantic love has its origins in the stories we read in childhood. And so much of our disappointment has its roots in the inevitable differences between these fairy tales and real life.

How many women (real or imagined princesses) have felt the heartbreak of waiting for a perfect prince to come along and instead found themselves in love with the wrong men? How many men have felt the sting of rejection from women who were looking for an ideal and failed to see the real, available man in front of them?

This story has a realistic ending because that's the way healthy love is. Falling in love may be splendid and glorious, but *keeping that love alive is the greatest challenge we face*. Falling in love while keeping sound judgment in place is equally difficult.

Perhaps in no other area of life are we so prone to mythology than in the area of romantic love. With no precise definitions, we speculate endlessly on love's meaning. The boundaries between friendship, romantic love, and a dating partnership are often fuzzy. We ask ourselves: "Is this real love?" We want to know what love is and what we can expect from it.

We look to our family of origin for answers and often come up empty-handed. Many of us came from families that were not models of healthy relationships. Our parents may have divorced bitterly, or in a friendly way (which way is right?). Or they stayed together and fought bitterly. Or they stayed together in a dead marriage. We hope that ours will turn out better, but we're not sure of how to make that happen.

To add to the confusion, Hollywood and television present us with their versions of what love is. A popular one is:

Boy meets girl in the midst of spine-tingling adventure. Sparks fly. They hate each other at first, then fall into bed, then love each other.

Their instant relationship is now "true love." Often these characters know nothing about each other and have very little in com-

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mon. Yet we are expected to believe that theirs is a lifetime love. And, sadly, we accept this in some way as a model for love relationships.

The Origin of the Mythology of Love. Our lack of a precise definition of love, plus a lack of role models for healthy love and a good dose of Hollywood, gives us fertile ground for developing myths. In fact, at no other time in history have we been so prone to the invention and preservation of that mythology than now, in the latter twentieth century. Ann Swidler, among many authors, writes about our modern tendency to develop and maintain notions about what constitutes “true love.”¹ These notions and ideas powerfully influence our attitudes, feelings, and behavior in relationships.

Often we are not aware of this influence, yet our lives and relationships are being colored nonetheless. Our impressions form the backdrop of our consciousness as we interact with others in our daily lives. Because so many of these impressions are inaccurate, we find ourselves kept from what we want by an invisible boundary. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the modern singles dating scene.

Myth: Love Is Forever. One of the first myths that we collide with is the idea of true love being forever. If it is real, then it is supposed to last. If it doesn't last, then it isn't real. The idea is that there is *one and only one true love* in each person's life.

This myth forces us to forever question whatever relationship we're in. Is this “the one”? How do I know? We second-guess ourselves instead of dealing with whatever it is that we have. Or we try to force the relationship into some idealistic mold that it may not fit into. Since I love you, this must be true love, and therefore it has to last.

Reality: Love is whatever it is and it lasts as long as it lasts. One person has the capacity to fall in love many times during a lifetime.

¹Ann Swidler, “Love and Adulthood in American Culture,” from N. J. Smelser and E. H. Erickson's *Themes of Love and Work in Adulthood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 120–147.

Today's singles are often men and women who have experienced the loss of a love (or more than one love) and who find themselves, contrary to expectations, back on the dating scene again. Many men and women are choosing to remain single until later in life. Others are divorcing or ending long-term relationships. Thus dating, once considered to be something you left behind after high school and college, is now commonplace for people throughout their life spans. Needless to say, we weren't prepared for this! And one of our difficulties lies with the abundance of romantic love myths that follow us into our dating lives, making it more difficult for us to get what we want. Let's look at more of these misconceptions and half-truths.

Myth: Dating Is Separate from Relating. This is the idea that dating, an often frustrating and unrewarding experience, is something that we endure as singles in order to eventually find someone with whom we can have a relationship. It's uncomfortable and awkward, but it's the dues you have to pay until you find the right person, and then—whew!—you can relax and have a relationship.

In this view, dating is often a series of maneuvers in which the goal is to attract and “get” the object of our affections. If we wear this, say that, and behave just so, we can win over a desired person. *Dating is a game we play in order to get what we want.*

Many books and articles have been written on how to do this. Much of the advertising industry targets this wish to win a desirable partner. Once we accomplish our goal—getting the right person—we can then relax and begin a loving relationship.

Reality: Dating Is Relating. From the first meeting, the first phone call, the first encounter, we have some sort of relationship with another person. How we relate with that person and the other people we date, how we go about meeting and getting to know others, how we determine whom to become emotionally and sexually involved with are crucial. These factors determine the kind of relationships we end up in. And the kind of dating relationships we have powerfully influence the kind of marriage we will have and,

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ultimately, the health and emotional well-being of our families. It looks something like this:

HOW WE MEET others influences the KIND OF DATING RELATIONSHIPS we have

HOW WE DATE influences the HEALTH OF OUR LONG-TERM ROMANCES, which influences the HEALTH OF OUR MARRIAGES, which influences the

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF OUR FAMILIES

If we are prone to falling in love too quickly while letting our rational minds fly out the window, we will find ourselves in skyrocket relationships that fizzle quickly. If we hide our true feelings from those we date, being afraid that we will “scare them off,” we will end up in relationships in which we do not feel free to express ourselves fully.

If we date in a manipulative way, revealing only what we want people to know in order to win them over, we will find ourselves in relationships that lack true intimacy or are even exploitative, with both partners feeling cheated out of the experience of real love. If we focus solely on keeping a desired lover, sacrificing our own needs in favor of our partner's, we will find ourselves in addictive relationships, “hooked” on people who can never give us what we want and need.

How we date is how we relate. The two cannot be separated. In order to have healthier relationships, we need to focus from the very beginning on how we date and how we interact.

More Fairy Tales

Myth: Successful Relationships Are Accidental. This is the idea that true love always finds you when you're not looking. This myth says that if we just go about our daily living, then the right partner will find us, magically, and with no effort on our parts we will be

blissfully happy ever after. A trip to your local movie theater will reassure you of the prevalence of this notion of romantic love!

Reality: Most Relationships Are Accidental in Real Life. We don't usually make conscious decisions about relating to others. Most of the time we put little energy into considering what we are looking for and what kind of partner we want. We tend to rely solely on feelings of attraction to guide us when we meet someone new. We count on chance encounters. And for most of us this works, up to a point.

Yes, we do eventually meet new people and have dates. We do fall in love and have relationships. *What we don't often do is create healthy love relationships that have the potential for lasting a lifetime.* Just having a relationship is not enough. To experience true success, we need to feel that with a partner we've made a special connection that carries the possibility of a lasting commitment, and this does not happen by accident.

Myth: Finding the Right Person Guarantees a Successful Relationship. Hand in hand with the last myth is the idea that all we have to do to have a great relationship is find the "right person." Again, this myth says that somewhere out there is the one and only perfect partner for us, and when the time is right we'll meet him or her. We'll fall in love, everything will fall into place, and we'll live happily ever after.

The problem with these two myths is that they leave everything to luck, chance, and fate, with no real power or control in our hands. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Reality: Successful Relationships Are Created. We are only able to have healthy, successful love to the degree that we have put *conscious effort* toward this goal. Only by consulting ourselves about what we really want, on an intellectual, spiritual, and emotional level, are we able to choose the right partners. Accidental love is often unhealthy love. Successful love is created and is a direct result of how we go about meeting and dating potential partners.

This view is very much to the contrary of the expectations we have by virtue of living in today's culture. Erich Fromm remarked that most people see loving as easy, while finding a partner is viewed as

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difficult.² This belief is the source of much of the frustration that singles feel today. “I’m ready for love,” we say. “I know how to love and be loved, I just need to find the right person to do that with. Where, oh where, can I find Mr. (or Ms.) Right? That would be the solution to my problems.”

The truth is that finding someone to love is the easiest part of love, if you are willing to take a few steps to increase your social exposure and improve your social skills. Finding someone with whom we are basically compatible, creating a healthy relationship with that person, and being partners in a lasting love is the greatest challenge that we face today. The good news is that we can do something about it.

Singles feel out of control of their love lives because they are looking for answers in the wrong place. The answer isn’t in the people we meet and date. No one out there is going to make romance easy or right for us. The real solution lies within, not without. It lies in our willingness to question ourselves about the problems of love and to diligently search for meaningful answers.

It’s too easy to brush off our past mistakes in relationships as being a simple matter of having chosen the “wrong person.” It is much more challenging, and infinitely more rewarding, to look to ourselves for the source of the problem. After all, what is the common denominator of all your relationships? You are, of course!

We can realize that regardless of how our past partners behaved (certainly we have lots of evidence about their flaws), we chose them and we entered into relationships with them. We can face the inner forces that influenced those choices, and we can make changes within so that we make better choices. We can question and challenge the romantic love myths that govern our attitudes and behaviors, replacing them with ideas that make sense in today’s world. Most important, we can become more conscious of each step of meeting, dating, and relating, increasing our level of awareness and choosing appropriate behaviors.

²Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

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In so doing, we are looking to ourselves for solutions, growing and becoming better partners for our future mates. Our lives and our relationships are in our own hands, not in the hands of some mythical perfect partner who may or may not come along someday.

Why Is Love So Challenging?

“But wait,” you say. “This is beginning to sound difficult. Isn’t love the most natural thing in the world? Can’t we just sit back and let love find us and unfold the way nature intended it to? Why must love be so difficult to find and to keep? After all, our grandparents and their parents didn’t have to read self-help books to find love.”

In one of the seminars I lead on dating and relating, I asked the men and women in my audience to talk about what they wanted and expected from their relationships. We wrote the responses on the blackboard, and the board was filled very quickly. What they wanted included:

love	honesty
acceptance	open communication
romance	commitment
nurturing	doing things together
great sex	a loving family life
companionship	listening
friendship	sharing
understanding	intimacy
support	personal growth

Then I asked how many of them believed that their parents expected these kinds of things from a marriage or love relationship. A few hands went up. I queried further as to how many of them believed that their grandparents expected these things from marriage. Only one or two hands went up. Great-grandparents? No hands went up.

Even though this isn’t a scientific survey, I think it indicates how dramatically our expectations of relationships, particularly the mar-

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riage relationship, have changed from those of previous generations. We want so much more than just a mate with whom to raise children and help with the chores or the family business. *We want all the goodies that a loving, intimate relationship seems to offer.*

Expectations Are Higher Than Ever. We want love, intimacy, sharing, acceptance, and nurturing from another human being. We want to know that we are valued above all others by our mate, and that they will be with us through thick and thin, good times and bad. We want open, honest communication. We want to know that we can share anything and everything with the person we love, and that they will still love us. We want support for our dreams in life and a partner to cheer us on. We want a relationship that allows us both to grow personally. Affirmation and positive feedback are wanted, and criticism offered in only the most loving way!

We want all this even though most of us are not prepared to deliver the goods. Not having grown up in loving, supportive, affirming environments, most of us are ill-equipped to love and be loved in the way we dream about.

In our imperfect families we learned ways of relating that don't necessarily help us as adults to have the healthiest of relationships. And these patterns began very early in life. Social scientists who have studied attachment behavior in infants have discovered certain patterns of relating that begin within the first few months of life and that profoundly affect the kind and quality of close relationships in adulthood, especially that between men and women.³ These studies show us that the way our parents interact with us early in life sets the stage for our relationships throughout life.

For years as a single, I believed that most of my relationship problems were the fault of the current man in my life, that because I loved him so much, the problem couldn't be mine. After all, I was capable of love. It wasn't my fault that I kept choosing men who couldn't love me back in the way that I wanted to be loved. Not until I began look-

³C. Hazan, "Patterns of Adult Love," *Human Ecology Forum*, Spring 1990.

ing to myself, exploring my own family's legacy and its shortcomings, did I begin to realize how truly lacking I was in the emotional and communicational skills that it takes to have a healthy love relationship. I had to take responsibility for developing those skills in order to have a chance of getting the love I wanted.

Someone once said that no one escapes childhood unscarred. Even in the best homes, parents fail to give their children everything they need in order to grow into fully productive human beings who are capable of loving and being loved and accomplishing their goals in life. Why is this? Simply put, it is impossible for parents to be all things for and to satisfy all the needs of their children.

Parents are human beings who are imperfect, flawed, lacking in sufficient insight, and who make lots of mistakes. Additionally, most parents do not bother to educate themselves in the most important task they will ever take on; they "wing it" when it comes to child rearing, just as their parents did, and their grandparents before them, and so on. Thus, we have imperfect people parenting other imperfect people, with only the examples of their own parents to rely on. The result: We all have deficits from our childhood. We all wish for something that our parents didn't give us, or wish we were not saddled with something that our parents did give us.

Some of us came from homes where emotional or physical abuse and neglect occurred as well. There is no doubt that abuse of any kind sets up patterns of relating and emotional responses that lead to difficulties with relationships in adulthood. Regardless of the particular family legacy, from the benign and imperfect to the most profoundly abusive, we all carry the emotional scars of less-than-perfect childhoods.

The Promise of Love. Harville Hendrix, in his groundbreaking book *Getting the Love You Want*, describes beautifully how this sets us up for our romantic relationships in adult life.⁴ Our unfulfilled

⁴Harville Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1988).

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needs from childhood do not disappear when we become adults. They follow us, in a largely unconscious fashion, and influence our choices in relationships. Without realizing it, we choose partners who represent our parents in some way. Then, having always wanted that parent to give us what we didn't get, we look to our love relationships to supply those needs. By its very nature, romantic love offers the fulfillment of our deepest emotional needs. It is this unconscious drive that draws us together in relationships.

Our very high expectations of love, coupled with our unconscious drive toward fulfilling unmet needs from childhood, leave us in a double bind. We want and expect so much from love, yet most of us have few experiences of the kind of love we want. Human beings are rarely able to accomplish levels of intimacy and love that are beyond the level they experienced growing up in their families unless they are willing to face their own inner deficits and make conscious choices to do better than their parents did.

Personal Growth Is the Key. Because we want so much more than our parents and grandparents yet are left with their legacy, we have a unique challenge that no previous generation undertook. We are faced with the opportunity to educate ourselves about family and love relationships, to face our own deficits from earlier in life, and to make changes in ourselves and our lives. If we choose, we can embrace the challenge of moving beyond the models of love that we inherited and creating relationships that are more suited to our modern expectations.

If we are willing to examine ourselves, learn to know ourselves, and stretch the limits of our capacity to love and be loved, we can get the love we want. Will this take some effort? Yes! Will this be uncomfortable at times? Most certainly. Personal growth is almost always uncomfortable.

Is it possible to have a truly loving, nurturing relationship with mutual love, admiration, and respect? Only if we say so. The first step, therefore, is to affirm the belief that it is possible (even if it's not yet clear how to make it happen). Second is the decision to settle into

the journey toward loving relationships, realizing that this won't happen overnight. It is important to give up on finding a perfect partner. In case you hadn't noticed, there aren't any! Instead, the goal is to *be our best possible selves, be open to personal growth, and focus on our own lives and what we want out of them.*

Why is love so challenging? Because we want the most out of love, and the obstacles to rewarding relationships have never been higher. However, the journey itself can be just as rewarding as the destination.

A Surprising Benefit. The search for a healthy love relationship carries its own reward. By looking within ourselves for our own sources of happiness and fulfillment, we find the controls of our lives in our own hands. By facing our own personal barriers to love, and making changes within ourselves, we are able to live more productive lives.

The real reward in the search for a loving relationship is not some mystical destination. Happily-ever-after exists only in storybooks. In real life, there are no guarantees that love will last. Even when you do find the love of your life and create a healthy relationship, there is no promise that it will never end. The reward is in the journey itself, in the day-to-day struggle to face and conquer fears and insecurities, to become conscious of our innermost feelings, and to communicate in the most authentic and honest way to a partner. The opportunity for personal growth and the enrichment of our lives is tremendous when we resolve to look to ourselves for the answers to life and love.

Sharon, an attractive woman in her late thirties, approached me at the end of the second session of a workshop I was leading. Her eyes sparkling, she related how much fun she was having meeting men since being inspired at the previous session. When I asked her if I could include her story in my book, she responded, "Wait until I have some real success, maybe in a couple of more months." I pointed out to her that, even though she hadn't found the right man yet, her having a more rewarding and fun experience of life as a single looked to me like success.

So often as singles we completely overlook or discount the growth that is available as human beings in the process of looking for love.

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Sharon's experience of being more outgoing and assertive in meeting men clearly helped her self-image as well as her sense of being in charge of her own love life. She was not passively waiting for love to find her. What a kick! No wonder she was thrilled.

Successful Dating: More Than the End Result. I believe that as we begin making changes in our dating lives, we can fall in love with the process itself. We can thoroughly enjoy practicing our social and relational skills. As we meet more people, find more of the right people to date, and have more enriching dating experiences, we can have a more fulfilling experience of life as a single, and this is valuable in and of itself.

I believe that the years we spend as single adults offer tremendous opportunities for personal growth if we are willing to look for them and not just step over them. Going to a singles dance on Friday night may look like just another one of those frustrating experiences in which you get all dressed up and don't find Prince Charming, but it could be much more than that. It could be an evening in which you resolve to work on your fear of meeting new people, the goal being to move out of your usual comfort zone, discover some things about yourself, and grow personally. Whether or not you meet Mr. or Ms. Right takes a backseat to the pride you feel at the end of the evening because you extended yourself, walking up to strangers, introducing yourself, and making new friends.

Being single does not mean that we have to be lonely and without joy, stuck in a holding pattern until the right person just happens along. The search for a rewarding relationship can be a true adventure, although not one without some risk!

If we can learn to enjoy the journey itself, looking for opportunities for personal growth along the way, we will be less focused on the end result and will be more likely to celebrate our successes along the way. We will also find ourselves happier and more fulfilled, and thus much more attractive to the kind of people we're looking for: other happy, fulfilled, and successful people.