

A “Dear Abby” column some time ago included a poignant letter, the painful bewilderment of which touched me, and maybe it will you too.

“Dear Abby, I am a 38 year old college-educated woman with a successful career. I have traveled all over the world and enjoyed a variety of life experiences. You are not going to believe this, but I have never been asked out on a date!

I have gone out socially (I asked the son of a family friend to the junior prom) and have gone out with groups of friends for years. I have even used escort services for business functions. But I have never had a boyfriend or the chance to turn down someone I didn’t like. Mother and Father told me that there is a lid for every pot. Lately they haven’t mentioned the subject.

I have a good sense of humor and have been told I’m interesting to talk to, but no man has ever shown a romantic interest in me. I dress well, and some people have told me I am pretty. (I have seen some extremely unattractive people who are part of a couple.)

Two years ago, I adopted a child. I live a full life and don’t sit at home or get depressed. However, what I really want in life is to meet a man who shares my interests and wants to build a life with me and my daughter. I can be alone, but I would rather not. Do you have a solution? ----Single in Seattle”

It’s not difficult to sense that the underlying longing there is to be loved. It’s a familiar kind of agony and bewilderment of those for whom, for whatever reason, it doesn’t happen. And as you know, sometimes it doesn’t.

That random aspect of finding loving companionship was the first part of Abby’s reply to “Single in Seattle”: that is, that for no perceptible reason, and though it’s unfair, sometimes people do not ever find the loving relationship for which they long. But Abby did go on then to suggest that it might be worthwhile to have what Abby called “truth sessions” with her most trusted male and female friends, to see if they could offer any insight. Did she, for example, come across to people as unapproachable or emotionally unavailable? Whether something like that was true in her case, we don’t know; but the possibility that a person is unwittingly creating barriers to his or her own need and longing to be loved is very real.

Whether for the married or for the unmarried, for the young or for the old, for the popular or for the isolated, remaining unloved (and/or believing oneself beyond the reach of love) can become a source of emotional, social, and spiritual problems. But the fact that the gift or blessing of being loved is often so unpredictable, illogical, and uncontrollable makes this a very frustrating matter. For it IS true that

loveable, loving, deserving people, nevertheless, do sometimes end up in life alone and/or emotionally starved in ways that make no sense whatsoever. Others who are selfish, emotionally distorted, and devoid of character are sometimes loved beyond what they either appreciate or deserve.

Yes, that's true. And still, being loved is NOT entirely a matter of chance. It can, in fact, be because he or she doesn't allow himself/herself to be loved. While there is a side of her that wants love, for any number of reasons and through a variety of means, she may barricade or vaccinate herself against really being loved.

One very typical such case in the Bible seems to have been the man Zacchaeus. You probably remember his story. He was a small man, a wealthy one, but had amassed his wealth working for the Roman oppressors, squeezing arbitrary taxes from his own people. For that and maybe other reasons, he was unpopular. Like many of his brothers and sisters down through history, his social isolation and his feelings of rejection fed on each other. That is, since people disliked him, he thickened his skin toward them. To avoid the pain of further rejection, he would reject and repel others before they could do so to him. It's a common survival strategy for one like him: "Maybe I won't feel your spurning and exclusion of me if I reject you first." Had you asked him about it, he would have undoubtedly assured you that, yes, he definitely wanted people to like him and love him, but that he knew it would never happen, since everyone he knew was much too mean and judgmental.

On the day of his well-known encounter with Jesus, he had ignominiously climbed a tree, hoping for a glimpse of Jesus, but without having to be down on the street, subject to the real or imagined glares and whispers of the crowd. Jesus apparently reads the situation as soon as he sees Zacchaeus hiding up there. He asks him to come down, saying that he wants to spend the day with him (which he does.) The impact of that day upon this isolated, lonely, emotionally starved man is astounding. Whether it's because Jesus has caught him off guard, with his defenses down, or because he is just so overwhelmed at anyone actually caring enough to want to be with him, in no time at all, Zacchaeus is a different person. With no preachings or scoldings or arguments from Jesus, he's now brimming with enthusiasm, is excited about reaching out with his considerable wealth to the underprivileged, and has decided to give double their money back to those of whom he had taken unfair financial advantage.

Admittedly, his case is extreme, but the personal miracle that happened when he risked letting someone in through his long-accumulated barriers and defenses is not at all an uncommon miracle.

But it can be very difficult for a person to allow that to happen. For whatever reason, human beings often have a whole repertoire of stances in life that, without their ever realizing it, get squarely in the way of being loved.

One very common and prevalent one – especially among men – is that which says, in effect, “I want to be loved for what I believe is lovable about me, but don’t you dare get close enough to know more about me than I wish you to know.” In other words, he wants to be admired, respected, and maybe worshiped, but that’s all. He wants no part of real closeness or emotional intimacy. That stance makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for love to reach him.

If you have scanned any paper that carries personal ads, you may have noticed, that though advertising for relationships, they actually belie just that. Some of them are the equivalent of a used car ad. The ones I’m referring to list admirable accomplishments, skills, and matters of appearance and, sometimes, even go on to prescribe what those need to be in any person that responds to the ad. Glaringly absent, though, is anything that even hints at an appetite for closeness, for sharing, or for anything close to a nurturing companionship.

The back pages of The New York Review of Books have similar ads, all very artfully done and exquisitely well-worded. But in many of them, too, there is the same hint of persons who would obviously like to be admired and maybe worshiped, but who, I suspect, aren’t interested in anyone who might wish to really know who the person is, rather than what he does or what he all has accumulated.

A chilling example I came across: “Hardworking, cynical, pragmatic, Ernst and Young audited 8-figure guy looking for similar doll with no mental or physical problems...”

It then goes on to give his weight and height and to say that he is bald and wears glasses. It’s not exactly self-disclosing, is it? Another says, “45-year-old female choreographer and filmmaker; elegant, exotic, macrobiotic, interested in metaphysics, and in world culture; seeking long-term partner. Please send photo.”

She doesn’t seem to understand the difference between material for an obituary and that which might reach out for a living, loving relationship. Given the fact that such ads need to be brief, it takes even more telling when they are so scrupulously unrevealing of anything humanly significant.

Real love rarely, if ever, works under those conditions. One can acquire admiration –even awe— through attractively packaging oneself. People get hired or elected that way. But to be loved virtually always demands self disclosure –a willingness to risk being known behind the public image, where it’s not possible to conceal quirks and insecurities.

Another formidable barrier to finding one's way into a loving relationship, though, is narcissism. The stance is this: "I love ME and I WANT you." Overtones of this are also sometimes there in some of the personal ads. It's the person who, having acquired all else that has to do with being a success, sees himself as now needing the "right person" to complete that attractive picture of him. It's a marriage shaped hole in his or her life; one which, as a competent, motivated, can-do person, he or she "deserves" to have filled and is going to fill. He may succeed. There are people quite willing to reduce themselves to being an extension of another's ego. But he shouldn't expect to find emotionally evolved, genuinely loving persons because such individuals aren't looking for a niche to fill as an add-on, wholly owned subsidiary to someone's life. They're looking for a relationship—for a mutually nourishing, loving companionship. And they do know the difference.

The other major barrier to being loved is off in almost the opposite direction. This person scares love away because of his wild expectations of what love should and will do and be. It's the person who has never formed her own identity, doesn't really know who she is and so is looking for someone to whom she can turn herself over; one who will then fill the emptiness, will single-handedly bring meaning to her life, and, above all, will rescue her from the tough process of functioning as an intentional, confident, mature, adult person, in her own right. One would have to be crazy to knowingly take that on in another's life since it's something that can't be done. As desperate as that person may be for love, the chances aren't good. Worse yet, what may happen is that she will mistakenly hook up with someone like her who is also looking for love as an answer to insecurity and lack of identity. When two such people link up, a mess of tragic proportions will follow. One writer describes it somewhat brutally and overly harsh. He describes what he feels is really taking place in some marriage ceremonies where this is the problem.

"Such couples inevitably find themselves standing before a minister to be married. Minister: "Do you take this woman with all her immaturity, self-centeredness, nagging, tears, and tension to be your wife forever?" The dumb ox, temporarily hypnotized by the prospect of being able to sleep with her every night mumbles "I do." Then the minister asks the starry-eyed bride (who is all of 18), "Do you take this man with all his lust, moods, indifference, immaturity, and lack of discipline to be your husband forever?"

She thinks that 'forever' means all of next week, because she has never experienced one month of tediousness, responsibility, or denial of her wishes, so she chirps, "I do," in the thought that now she has become a woman...

They are now legally permitted to breed, fuss, bully, spend each other's money, and be held responsible for each other's bills. It is now legal for them to destroy each other, so long as they don't do it with a gun or a club."

Now that is overly harsh, but, even so, it makes the point: love can do a lot of wonderful things, but when it is sought as the perfect, all-encompassing answer by someone who doesn't yet know himself—has no idea what his life might come to mean—it degenerates into total disillusionment.

You do see, then, how intricate is this matter of opening oneself to be loved. When someone seeks and hopes and prays to be loved, or prays for more love, he needs to understand what it all requires.

To ask to be loved is to ask to be vulnerable. It means to drop the facades and masks. The prayer, "God, let me be loved," must not secretly mean just, "God, let me be admired," or "God, let me be respected," or, merely, "God, help me be useful," and not even, "God, help me be enjoyable and likeable." No, to pray, "God, let me be loved," is to open myself to being frighteningly exposed to another, awesomely available to another, to be more understood than I thought I wished to be, and to be subject to hurt, loss, and disillusionment that I might otherwise avoid.

So love is not a certainty, not a science, nothing that can be forced, and certainly not an entitlement. But letting down the barriers, opening oneself to others, cultivating an appetite for all kinds of people, and having a humble-but-solid understanding of who one is and what are one's own gifts and limitations as a person, adds up to a grace that is well worth the trouble, no matter whether it gets the results one wants or not. Happily, it virtually always turns out to make a person quite loveable.