

Truth, Daring & Dating at Midlife

From Philip Belove, Ed.D.

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Welcome. This letter represents the fruit of ten years of academic and clinical research into the world of midlife singles. It's designed to help you figure out what's going on in relationships and how to create meaningful and satisfying relationships. Please enjoy it, please forward it, please always give credit. To submit questions, to see other issues and articles, to subscribe, go to <http://www.datingatmidlife.com>

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Lies & Dazzling Lies

(part one of two)

By Philip Belove, Ed.D.

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I chose this classic Duke Ellington song because Bob Russell's lyrics are a masterpiece and a great example of the kind of lying common in midlife courtship and dating. I'm calling it a Dazzler and after I write about the why's and how's of lying in dating, I'm going to suggest some ways to handle it.

*Do nothing till you hear from me,
Pay no attention to what's said.
Why people tear the seams of anyone's dreams
Is over my head.*

*Do nothing till you hear from me,
At least consider our romance.
If you should take the words of others you've heard,
I haven't a chance.*

*True, I've been seen with someone new,
But does that mean that I've been untrue?
When we're apart,
The words in my heart*

Reveal how I feel about you.

*Some kiss may cloud my memories,
And other arms may hold a thrill,
But please, do nothing till you hear it from me--
And you never will.*

When you are checking out a dating possibility you carry two lists in your head. One is the list of what's great, positive, exciting and inviting. The other is the list of stuff you don't want to have to deal with, the hygiene factors. A relationship can be clean and safe but not very attractive, so you make the person a friend and that's it. At the same time a relationship can be very exciting and promising but the hygiene factors – and by that I mean relationship hygiene, like habitual dishonesty, emotional insecurity, baggage, and phantom third party influences -- can be so bad they finally chase you away. In this issue and subsequent ones, we're going to talk about relationship hygiene factors, how to think about them and respond. The first one is lying.

I think the best way to protect yourself from lying in courtship is to have a generous, even good-humored sensibility about it. You want to see both it's temptations and it's dangers. There is some comedy here. At midlife, adults should be able to look at our dark sides – our bad habits, our less-than-noble impulses -- and really see them clearly, but with a sense of humor that is generous and forgiving. There are reasons for this.

First, our dark sides are part of who we are and always have been. Acknowledging our temptations is the first step toward being able to control them. It's like being a teacher and making the bad kids sit in the front of the room where you can keep an eye on them. Second, mixed in with all the yukky stuff are jewels and talents. We need that stuff to be fulfilled and happy. So you have to find a clear and fearless way of thinking about your bad habits. For me the test of fearlessness is a forgiving sense of humor.

Finally, the more clearly we see these dynamics in our selves, the more clearly we can see them in others. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians (who were a debauched group and needed a lot of help) right after the section where he talks about the nature of love and charity (which is what I'm asking you to bring to this discussion of lying) he says "When I was a child I spoke as a child and understood as a child but when I matured I put away childish things. I used to see as through a glass, darkly, but now I see face to face, now I shall know as I am known." This "Know as I am Known" part is what I'm emphasizing. The more generously you understand the temptations within, the easier it is for you to resist them when to are being manipulated by others. Every new relationship is a calculated risk. To calculate the risks, it's important to be honest with yourself.

So why do people lie in midlife dating? For Power and Sex.

In midlife dating people are mainly tempted to lie to increase their power (to manipulate a relationship) and to get sex. First we'll look at power.

“As long as we were dating casually, I was infinitely flexible. I could go along with anything. It was just a date. I had my own life. But the more we bonded, the more I needed her, the more I had to organize my decisions with her in mind, the less flexible I seemed to be. I guess I was more stubborn than I thought I was.”

Researcher David Buss claims that in a broad survey of literature, men submit and go along with stuff they resent 25% more than women. Men are more likely to lie and say, “It’s okay,” when it’s not. There aren’t a lot of surveys yet about why men do this, so we can only guess at possible reasons. A lot of men take pride in being good problem solvers, patient, flexible and resourceful. A lot of men like to let women be in charge of their intimate life. A lot of men are very uncomfortable being angry with women and don’t know how to do it productively. A lot of men fear angry women and placate them whenever they can. They like to underestimate their own stubbornness.

Sometimes it’s hard to admit that you are in a power struggle. Why do some people prefer only casual relationships? No power struggles; no need to be angry. You know you are struggling for power when you are angry.

But if you care about a relationship, sometimes you have to stand up for what you want. Confronting and challenging someone you care about is stressful. There are good and bad ways to do these confrontations and we’ll talk about them later.

People lie to create sexual opportunities. We all know this but seldom acknowledge it. So it’s important to state it clearly.

Sometimes people would rather not know the truth about their partner’s sexual intentions. A woman said to her dating partner, “I can’t stand this. You won’t change. You won’t talk to a therapist. You won’t break up and I can’t kick you out of my life. I’m going to have an affair. Should I tell you who it’s going to be? He said, “Only if it’s someone famous.”

Another example of how common it is for people to not want to think about their sexual behavior. Someone who believes in and practices a very detailed kind of safe sex conversation said that the candor can be a complete turn off. And, he said, that’s not a bad thing.

In moving a dating relationship toward sex, the lies men tell will be about the things women care about. They’ll lie about their availability and interest in commitment. They will be willing to imply or allow a woman to believe they are more interested than they are. They will also mislead about their financial security, hoping a woman will believe they have more wealth and status than they

do.

Women, in turn, will tend to lie about their age, will minimize their sexual history and exaggerate their youthfulness. Men expect age in internet ads to be under-reported. They make an estimate about a woman's basic sexual availability and sometimes use this to evaluate whether the women can be trusted to be loyal. And almost everyone takes it for granted that women color their hair, and in some circles, get surgery.

It is strange how this impression management changes for women with marriage. I know more than one woman who has blossomed rather gloriously into gray, tonsorial yahoo, once remarried. I've also noticed that married women like to dress up like prostitutes at costume balls. I also remember sitting for coffee with a midlife couple who'd been married for a year. She'd been thin and had gained weight. During the conversation, he had his arm around her and absently, pleasantly fiddled with the fat on her waist. Being in a solid relationship seems to make people free to claim their dark sides.

These kinds of lies, though, are garden-variety stuff, mere impression management. Once a relationship gets rolling, a different kind of struggle emerges. There are the kinds of lies that people have more trouble with.

(Continued in Part Two)