

Looking for the Love of Your Life

You'll know you're ready for the love of your life when you've become the person you'd like to be with. (Dorothy Satten: Real is Better Than Perfect)

Dating is a lot like playing the slot machines. Whether you take the retro approach by being open to meeting someone -- at the grocery store, at the gym, at the park, and everywhere else you go -- or by going online, you have to make an emotional investment in order to get into the game. Going retro involves putting yourself in "ready" mode to flirt and explore the potential for a relationship with anyone might that might be a fit. Online dating requires that you spend hours creating and polishing up a profile and upload the best pictures (hopefully of yourself) that you can find. Either way, it's a lot of work.

The next stage, hoping something works out, is like dropping coins into the nickel slot machines; you drop your coin (your hopes and dreams) into the one that looks luckiest and pull the handle. Depending on how patient you are, you might have to drop a lot of nickels to even get a small payoff.

Once you get a "hit," the stakes go up. Now you have to see if the spark you initially felt is real. This is like moving up to the quarter machines. It is a risky process and will probably take a few quarters. If you are going retro, you need to find out if there's any substance to the other person's flirting. With the online approach, need to see if the e-mails and/or instant messages you are sending back and forth go anywhere. And because you never know how this might pan out, it's a good idea to keep playing the nickel machines, sending out messages or being open to other offers that come your way. Meanwhile, assuming you that you're getting encouragement with the potential other half of a relationship, you need to see if you make plans for a more intimate form of contact. This could be talking on the phone, meeting for coffee, going out for dinner, going on a bike ride, playing tennis or anything that allows you to get to know each other better and in a different way. No matter how many quarters you drop, the odds are against things working out. You may find out that that spark you felt died. If it did, go back to your nickel machines and shell out those nickels.

If the spark is still there, you get to move up to the dollar machines and start taking bigger risks. (I'm assuming here that you are looking for more than just a fuck buddy or a brief, no strings attached, sexual encounter.) It's time, if you haven't checked this before, to see if they really are available. One key question you might want to ask is, "Are they really single?" The fact that they are in a relationship that they describe is really dead but which they haven't, for whatever reason, left yet does not signify totally available. You'd be amazed, down the line, how the hoped for break-up either doesn't happen or drags on for what feels like forever. A second important question is, "Do they have time to pursue a relationship?" Again, good intentions don't do much. Someone who has kids, works 50 hours a week, and is going to school probably doesn't have a lot of time for you.

Once you've got it that they really are available, you have to drop another dollar and see if you are both really mutually attracted to and interested in each other. This usually takes a number of rounds of dropping in dollars and cranking down that handle. The first dollars usually go towards doing things together and slowly but surely becoming more authentic with each other. This takes time because we usually put our best selves forward when we meet someone new. These best selves usually spend some time trying to look fabulous, and put energy into not engaging in patterns that they fear might be annoying. For some people, this involves telling out and out lies. (Someone I know fell in love with someone he met on My Space only to discover that the other person's whole story was a lie.) Because we tend to be a bit fragile and fear really letting our true selves show, this stage may take awhile (read a lot of dollars), even if you are a lesbian and have the classic second lesbian date that involves a u-haul and a shared bathroom. You're going to have to keep dropping those dollars until you feel safe enough to be yourself. Another good question to ask is, "Are we compatible?" If, for example, you are into fixing gourmet meals and they would rather eat at McDonald's or don't give a whit about eating, choppy seas are on their way. Similarly, if you like to spend your spare time backpacking and they want to spend all their spare time shopping, going to plays and going to dance clubs, you might want to cut your losses now before the battles begin. And, you especially might want to part ways now if it's your heart's desire to have kids and they respond that hamsters are on the right track when they eat their own offspring. If, after all this, things are still a go, maybe you have a chance.

Most of us take this route to finding a mate because it gives us a sense of doing something without having to look at ourselves and make deep, personal changes. And as with slot machines, sometimes you win and actually meet a wonderful match. Most of us, at some point or other, have gotten lucky in the dating game gamble. The catch is that if you don't work on yourself and on whatever relationship emerges, even the most perfect match is bound to fail. You and your partner will either fall into a pattern of settling for less than you want and/or need (a set up for misery), or you and your partner will break up. If you're lucky, that break-up will be amicable and quick - - before you adopt puppies and buy a house together.

Another, less draining approach, is to work on your self first -- become the person you want to be, before you go out looking for the love of your life. Do the things you want to do. Get comfortable in your own skin. Learn to love your self. The more content, more fulfilled, and more self-loving you are, the less desperate you'll feel and the more people will yearn to be with you.

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