

FINDING ONESELF

Since his divorce, Arthur had gone out with more women than he could count or than his friends thought appropriate. Some he liked, some he didn't. Some were nice, some were attractive, some were interesting; but none really grabbed him. [Well, some had quite literally grabbed him, and that was kind of nice, but he never felt excited about anyone.] When he thought long and hard about why he hadn't gone out with anyone more than three times, he came to an important realization. None of them was sufficiently like himself. As he went down his list (first mental, then written) of what he wanted in a partner, he saw that he was basically describing himself.

Rather than be embarrassed, as some might be, he simply thought, "And why not?" He was happy enough with himself as company; he liked being with himself. So if he was going to be with someone else a lot of the time, it would make sense that it be someone with his interests, personality, quirks, likes, and dislikes. It didn't just feel safe or narcissistic; it felt downright sensible. And if there was anything in which Arthur took pride it was in being sensible. [As he thought about that, he moved "sensible" to the top of his PAL (partner attribute list).]

Not having an identical twin (as far as he knew), he realized that nobody would be exactly the same as him. But if he could come very close, it would be almost like being with himself, but with a bit of added perspective thrown in. Always the physicist, he made the analogy with how you see things three dimensionally. With either eye alone, things look flat. But using both gave everything more depth, just because the viewing angles were a very little bit different. Yes, someone just the least bit different from himself would be just perfect.

So that's what he decided he wanted – an alter ego. A minimally altered ego. An alter to, apparently, a rather large ego. He felt happy for days after his realization, an added spring to his already quite springy step. After all, actually finding this person should be simple, an exercise left to the reader, as his mathematician friends would have said. Knowing what he was looking for was the hard part; from here it should just be a mechanical sifting exercise. It was like so many assignments he had had when he was a physics student – the hard part was figuring out the approach. Now that he saw the big picture, he just had to connect the dots. He was content for days. He chuckled often; his ego swelled a bit more; he found himself whistling for the first time since long before his divorce. But eventually he realized he was still really no closer to actually meeting the RW (reflective woman) as he secretly called her in his diary. It was one day when he was baking a cake that he made his next breakthrough. As he was sifting the second cup of flour, the twitching stopped in his hand and started in his mind. Sift. That was the next, and perhaps final, step. He needed, somehow, to sift through the millions of women out there and find the one most similar to him. He looked at the flour sifter and wished it was a woman sifter (WS), a device which, he realized, he had never heard of, but which he badly needed.

It wasn't long before he realized that sifting through large amounts of data was child's play for a computer. Could it sift through large numbers of women? Could it be the WS that would help him find his RW? His friends had for a long time been encouraging him to try computer dating. He had scoffed; he had somehow deep in his gut felt that this was not for him. But now, as he reconsidered, he had another brainstorm. As any physicist knew, opposites attract. If he wanted to attract someone just like himself, he couldn't be the attractor. On the contrary -- he had to lure his RW by pretending to be his opposite. He wanted someone who

would be attracted to his opposite. To find his minimally altered ego, he had to create his maximally altered ego.

And so began what his friends would head-shakingly refer to as Arthur's self-contradictory period (SCP). Deliberately as always, but a bit more frantically than usual, he checked into every computer dating service in cyberspace. Rejecting the ones that seemed too touchy-feely or spiritual, he had no trouble settling on Match 'n Catch, the service that offered "love at first byte." It felt very peculiar to describe himself as his opposite. Where he was asked to describe his interests, he wrote about bowling, butterflies, and Byzantium, three things that he avoided at all costs. When asked about his fears, he wrote about hot air balloons, all the while fondly remembering his first ascent, when everyone else got sick and he just stuck his face into the wind and grinned for days. When asked to review a list of 40 possible personality traits, he checked off each one that he thought did not in any way apply to him.

For the first few days after he hit the "send" button, he didn't think much about his little experiment in perverse personalities (EPP), as he liked to call it. But when he heard nothing back for 5, 6, 7 days, he began to wonder. He was alternately depressed, angry, relieved, and disbelieving. But, alternating as he was, he still did not have his alter ego. He finally had to admit that he was really counting on this to work, that deep down he believed (even if none of his friends did) that this was his best shot at a successful relationship.

When he got up on day 9, a red light was flashing on his computer. The word "MATCH" was jumping around his screen, and soon all sorts of butterflies were similarly jumping around his stomach. His nervousness didn't slow him down. He clicked purposefully and deliberately until one more click would reveal all. And then – there she was! A picture of a beautiful woman. She seemed a bit taller than he would have expected, but it was hard to tell since the picture only showed from her shoulders on up. And anyway, he really didn't care that much what she

looked like. He was dying to read the long description that followed, a description that he fully expected would be like reading from his autobiography.

He settled into his favorite easy chair, with a glass of his favorite wine. He put on some low background music – Viennese waltzes – and began to read. The first sentence surprised him. She said she was an early riser. This seemed rather strange since his favorite time of day began at 11 PM. The second sentence really shocked him. She said that what she liked doing when she rose early was run four or five miles. The last time Arthur had run was to catch a bus five years ago – and even though it saved him a 3 hour wait for the next one, he hadn't been sure it was worth it. There must be some mistake....no, now he understood – she was a joker like him. She was just teasing him. He relaxed.

His period of relaxation was, however, very short. Everything he read seemed wrong. Or at least, it wasn't him, and -- ipso facto -- it wasn't what he was looking for in a partner. His surprise and shock turned to disappointment and anger. How could he relate to an art-loving, spiritual, vegetarian nature girl?! This was outrageous. He threw down the last of his wine, almost threw a few other things, replaced the waltzes with hard rock, and started pacing and muttering.

Before he even realized it, he was sitting at his computer, writing a rather snide letter to this sad excuse for a computer dating service. After some choice expletives, he got into the specifics. He demonstrated with precision and detail, as if he were writing one of his physics papers, how, despite his brilliant strategy, they had matched him with someone completely inappropriate. He went on for pages until he was totally spent.

Three days later, the guys and gals at Match 'n Catch were sitting around, chatting about how their business showed that you could do good and do well at the same time. Hillary mentioned that she had, however, opened a rather angry letter that day, the first in a long time.

“How strange,” said George, “me too.” And how much stranger that the letters seemed to come from two people they had matched with each other, two people who had scored the highest compatibility ratings (CRs) of any two people they had ever matched up. How could they possibly have failed? Was there a terrible bug in their program.

Intense scrutiny followed until they realized that both letters spelled out the same perverse strategy. Had they actually met each other, they would surely have found themselves.

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