

Dating: dilemmas and delights

By Robert W. Smith

Martin slumped into my classroom one day after school a few weeks ago. He is one of my former students who is now in high school.

"How are things going?" I asked, though his body language had already alerted me that he wasn't in the best of spirits.

"Awful," he replied.

"What's wrong?"

"Nobody likes me. I don't have any girlfriends. I never go out on a date. I feel like a bag of dirt."

Martin let loose with a whole flood of pent-up anger but the core problem was really *dating*. Martin was distressed because he didn't have a steady girl. He didn't *dare* ask out the one girl he really wanted to know because she was "too popular" and he couldn't stand the idea of her saying no. He figured he didn't have enough money to really impress a girl and he wasn't any good at talking with girls anyway. He felt foolish every time he tried to strike up a conversation.

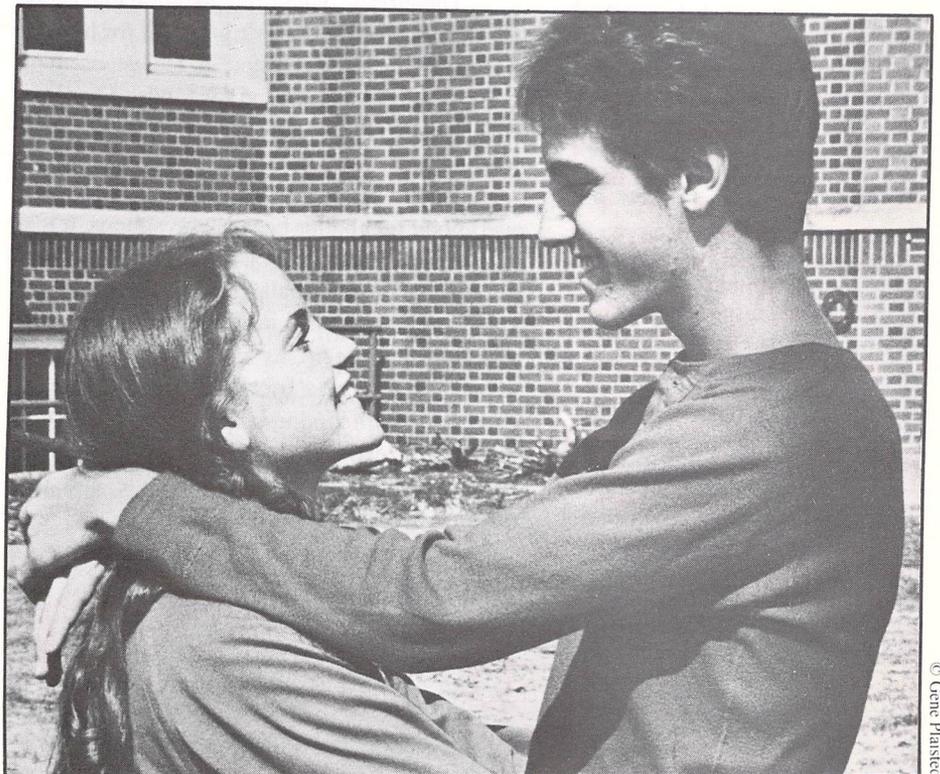
Dating isn't everything

Then there's Joanna, now a sophomore. She's going steady, but with a boy she doesn't really care for. She knows that he is mostly interested in a physical relationship with her and she would like to break up and date other boys. Their dates aren't much fun for her, but her boyfriend's popularity and good looks make him a convenient support for her social life.

Joanna doesn't want to face the challenges that would follow from a break-up. She doesn't have to worry about whether she'll have a date for any of the big social events of the year. She's not that confident that anyone else will like her or care for her.

Joanna feels lonely and frustrated. Her dreams of happy and exciting high school years are fading. She's already quit the pep squad and the band, because her boyfriend complained they took time they needed together. Her grades have slipped because she's so distracted over the whole situation.

She's taken up smoking and abandoned the athletic pursuits that she used to enjoy. Her bike hasn't left the garage in months. After all, it's not pretty to sweat; besides her steady seemed uncomfortable with her easy athletic skill. Twice, Joanna has gotten drunk at parties lately, and she feels even more dejected by the spectacle she has made of herself.



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attitude. You simply have to think beyond your own self to the feelings of the other. You need to see dating as an opportunity, a chance to meet new people and to form lasting friendships.

It's normal, of course, to feel awkward when you're getting to know each other, especially on a first date. You want to feel attractive and intelligent but often feel clumsy instead. You're often uncertain what to do or talk about until you hit on a subject of mutual interest. Yet there is joy in the anticipation of learning about another person and in sharing ideas and hopes and dreams.

Does it take money?

Commercials on television and magazine advertisements would have you believe that money and the things it can buy are the absolute essentials for happy living. As Christians, you may know differently but you have a hard time *being* different.

Martin suffered from this "Mastercard syndrome." He thought it took money to impress a girl. He didn't recognize the trap money might have been. After all, would his date only want his money and the good times it could buy? Or would Martin ever be appreciated just for himself, with or without money?

Dating can become an enormous frustration for boys and girls with these lopsided values. If a girl judges the success of her evening out by the amount of money lavished on it, her boyfriend is a lot better off finding someone with a more wholesome set of values.

Dates do not *have* to be expensive. The purpose of a date is to get to know each other and to have fun. You don't have to be dressed in designer jeans, either, to learn who a person really is. Bill Cosby told his television son that no teenage boy needed a \$95 shirt "unless he's on a stage with his four brothers." If the outside is all your date sees, he or she is not very perceptive and certainly not very mature.

What to do and where to go

I spent one whole dollar on the best date of my life. It was the entrance fee to a public garden. My date (and future wife) and I had an opportunity to stroll quietly and undisturbed down its many paths. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes we just walked and thought and enjoyed our special closeness.

Dating can be as dull as a meal of boiled cabbage. Or you can let your imagination soar.

Q. When I have a good time on a date, I feel like I owe something. I worry about my date's feelings and that he'll feel rejected if I don't want to go out again or something. How can I feel more free about this whole area?

A. A date is not a business deal. More than anything, it's a chance to get to know someone better. Neither of you owes the other anything, except respect. The best thing you can give anybody you date is your attention and your honest responses to him as a person. If he expects anything more, he's the wrong person for you. You're not responsible for his feelings. Letting go of that concern will be freeing. I'm sure it's difficult enough to keep in touch with yourself and your own feelings about dates and life in general.

Joanna says it's no big deal but her life has changed and dating's had a lot to do with it.

David, on the other hand, dates often and freely, going out with many different girls. He has a very active social life. He can make people laugh, but his jokes never hurt anyone's feelings. He enjoys a good time and seems to enjoy life thoroughly. David has as many problems as the next guy but he doesn't seem to let them get him down.

The girls he dates often mention that David *listens* to them. He doesn't just wait for his date to stop talking so he can start in. He listens attentively to what she says and responds to her line. This shows that he really cares about the person he's with.

David can walk into a room and make everybody feel better because he's there. It's an extraordinary talent. He isn't particularly handsome nor is he a football star. He is popular with everyone but it didn't just happen. In fact, as a child, he had been shy and quiet. He simply learned how to be a friend. He cares. He treats everybody with kindness and he will talk to anyone. It's no wonder that David has such a successful social life. He likes people and they respond to his friendly ways.

Building friendships

Dating can be a source of confusion and anxiety, but it can also represent a peak of joy and delight in the teen years. It's largely a matter of

Sure the show and a dinner out can be a fine date occasionally and so can a school dance. But what about a bike date along some of the bicycle paths in your community with maybe a picturesque park and a picnic lunch as your destination? A hike along nearby trails or a pleasant ramble along less populated roads can offer opportunities for communication and sharing that no crowded party can ever offer.

If you are going to be a true lover, you have to care. You have to look beyond your own desires to those of another. As followers of Jesus, this means caring about our whole family, looking out for the community too. So why not try "volunteering" as a date idea? Join the local youth group in your parish and let your date be a visit to the sick at a local clinic or to a center for persons with disabilities, or helping an elderly neighborhood couple catch up on their lawn work. The Red Cross is always seeking volunteers for its services to local hospitals. Your parish has a flood of unmet needs begging for willing hands. What better way could you learn to see your date as a person than in service to others?

Mass and other parish functions can also be another dating opportunity. Young men and women who value their faith would usually like to date and eventually marry a person with deeply held religious values. In a Church-sponsored setting, you have an opportunity to share with each other your values and ideals.

Steady dating

Should you "go" with somebody? Yes—eventually. Going steady is the way you get to know somebody well, to recognize his or her faults and crazy habits, and to find out if you are right for each other in the lifetime commitment of love that is marriage.

But are you ready now for that lifetime commitment? Probably not. Only *you* can know for sure, of course, but the teen years, especially the early teens, are terribly young in our society to make such a commitment.

Just remember Joanna for a minute. Going steady is a way for her to maintain her approval rating with her friends. It gives her status with the "in" crowd. But it has serious drawbacks for her and it can for you as well. The most damaging is the exclusive nature of the involvement.

You are shutting yourself off from the fun of meeting the world of exciting and interesting personalities out there because that might seem like "cheating" on your boyfriend. If you shut out that world by dating one person exclusively, you shut out opportunities to enhance the quality

and happiness of your teen years and to know what kind of person is right for you.

Joanna is a coward. She hangs on to her unsatisfying relationship rather than face the unknown. It is easier for her than the fear of rejection. Every teenager who is going steady should examine his or her conscience to see if that relationship is really a crutch to avoid the fear of rejection. Is the other person merely a convenient tool to avoid social embarrassment?

Joanna is also letting someone else run her life. If you are involved in a smothering relationship, you owe it to each other to let go or force yourself loose. True love involves sacrifice and sharing. It cannot succeed if it is founded on selfishness.

The facts of life

Our secular society projects a distorted image of sex. It is most brutally expressed in the Playboy "philosophy" which sees the other person as a thing to be used for one's own satisfaction. It is valued as long as we get pleasure from it and then discarded like a broken toy when we tire of it.

It sometimes appears that adolescents discard rag dolls and baseball mitts for "toys" that breathe, walk and talk. You may be tempted to judge the value of your classmates by their muscular and sexual development. The most difficult "fact of life" for some people to learn is that classmates of the other sex have feelings (beyond the physical) and that they hurt when they are rejected or used or insulted. You may know the facts of reproduction and sexual mechanics, but you might not be so familiar with the deeper personal aspects of love that involve sacrifice and sharing and caring.

Our faith calls us to be particularly aware of the deeper dimensions of relationships, with or without a so-called sexual dimension. It is our belief that sexual love is so intimate an expression of our most intense love for another that it is reserved until we have made the ultimate commitment of our lives in marriage. We do not see sex as just a mechanical function of the body, a mental gymnastics exercise, or cheap entertainment. It is an ultimate act of love.

Toward becoming ourselves

Have you seen the poster with the messy-looking little kid and the caption, "Be patient. God isn't finished with me yet"? That poster expresses a comforting and comfortable truth.

Q. I'm always afraid I'll do the wrong thing and come on too strong. Sometimes I think I'll never learn any balance in this dating business. I can't read minds, you know!

A. Don't try. Know your *own* mind and be only the person you are, the "real thing." The "wrong thing" is being somebody else. Sometimes you can build this confidence in your own worth by sitting down and listing the positive things about yourself. Don't be modest either. Be honest. The wonderful traits of your character and personality will find their own balance if you allow yourself "out" on dates and in relationships.

Q. Lots of kids talk like they know all about sex. I wish I could tell who's faking it. Sometimes I think I'm the only one who hasn't *done* it.

A. A lot of teenagers (and adults) mask their own insecurities by bragging about their sexual achievements, real or faked. It doesn't really matter who's *done* it. What truly matters is you—your own self-respect. Sex is part of a larger picture, like the one you deserve. You deserve caring, commitment and respect. Sex, often used as a synonym for intercourse, is meaningful, satisfying and an act of love within the commitment of marriage. A hunger for love and security leads people of all ages to *pretend* knowledge and experience and to be willing to be "used" for someone else's selfish need to boast. Just don't fake it yourself. Self-esteem is worth more than a reputation gained at someone else's expense.

God isn't finished with *any of us* yet, whether we are 16 or 60. We are all pilgrims on a voyage toward becoming ourselves. We are still finding our identities and developing aspects of our personalities. Our dreams and our desires may change course rather often through the years.

One of the things a young man or woman on a date needs to consider about his or her partner is the openness of that person to mature growth and change. There are some people who are closed to criticism and learning. These people may never have the strength, the true humility, to grow and broaden their experience as adults. They are not good candidates for a lasting relationship.

10 tips for dating success

Dating isn't really a matter of methods and pointers. So why is there a list here? These "tips" are ways to reflect on your own needs and hopes as well as the ease and enjoyment of your dating partner.

1. *Go ahead* and ask the person you want to know. Don't let fear of rejection control you. You may think he or she is so popular you haven't got a chance. Everybody else may be just as hesitant as you are. The other may be just waiting for your call. Even if you are turned down, you'll live (after a brief comatose period) and you *might* learn something from the experience.
2. *Don't use your date.* You're going out with a *person*—not a *toy*. Remember that she's not a plaything to use and discard and he's not a rung on a social ladder.
3. *Plan "fun" dates.* Pick activities where you have an opportunity to express joy, energy and enthusiasm. Not every date has to be the same old tried and true formula. Use your imagination. Go jogging, play tennis, bike to the beach, volunteer to help at a local charity. *Do things.* Don't just sit there (more or less) and be passive.
4. *Avoid obvious trouble spots.* A bad crowd, a tough area, a party where drinking or drug use is going to occur can put even innocent people in jeopardy.
5. *Talk.* The best dates allow time for sharing. It's the only way to get to really know and value the other person. You may or may not find you have a lot in common. In either case, you'll have gained insight into yourself and the other person.
6. *Listen.* Everybody loves a good listener. Some of the most popular people simply know how to listen attentively to the words of another.
7. *Double-date* occasionally, especially on first dates. You can double your fun and avoid much

of the discomfort that often accompanies that first attempt to be together in a social situation. Conversation seems easier and there's less tension and uncertainty.

8. *Be yourself.* Don't brag. Nobody admires a braggart. But don't be bashful either. Everybody has admirable traits and unique talents. Share your thoughts and your dreams. The difference between sharing and comparing is a willingness to hear what your date thinks and feels about the subject as well.

9. *Don't keep a scorecard.* Winning "points" makes you a real loser! Dating is not a game where you have to "score" with your date either sexually or in one-upmanship. And "kissing and telling" proves that you really didn't care about the person—you were interested only in making points with the crowd.

10. *Be responsible.* It's a two-way street. Both people on a date have an equal responsibility to care about themselves, each other and the relationship itself. No girl should have to feel it's all up to her to judge "when to stop."

Beyond a perfect 10

On a date and in our lives, the most important value we can demonstrate is our sense as Christians of the personal worth of every individual. This is the heart and soul of the experience of faith. If we live Christ's commandment to love one another, then dating will become a joyful, exciting and rewarding aspect of the teenage experience. ■

To extend this Update:

1. *Reread the 10 tips for dating success. Pick one and do it.*
2. *If you are using this Update in a group, discuss what you hope to find in a date: sense of humor, beauty, etc.*

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