

O P I N I O N

The dating game

By Sean McLennan

Is it just me or is dating in the '00's seriously screwed up? Sorry...obviously, it's just me or I wouldn't be as frustrated as I am. Someone apparently changed the rules without letting me know.

Or maybe it *is* me that's screwed up. Maybe the lack of dating practice when I was a teen has had more of an impact than I thought. Maybe I'm just not in touch with my own generation. Maybe I need to get out of the Midwest. Maybe there is something wrong with me (no, it couldn't be that!). Maybe, gods forbid, I'm trapped in some fifties conservative ideal of dating (odd since I never saw the fifties—or the sixties for that matter). Well, if I am, maybe the fifties were better! (Did I really just say that?)

I first noticed this trend at my junior high school dances—asking a girl to dance was serious business. Not only was it an explicit statement of your carnal desire, it was implicitly expressing your desire to “go out”. If you danced with the same girl more than once, you practically were “going out”. The next step was picking out china patterns.... As a gay boy who really just wanted to be out on the floor, those were not messages I was comfortable conveying—“going out” led to kissing which led to petting and... eeee! Let's not go there! Who wanted to get into a position where one might be expected to perform? Not I!

Perhaps that's a little exaggerated, but certainly “going out” to me at the time meant “relationship” with all that entails: love, monogamy, and sex. It must have meant the same to my peers 'cause they certainly behaved as though it did. Where else would I have gotten it from?

Now, thirteen years later, it doesn't seem to me that much has changed. Even though I'm an introvert at heart, I have few qualms about asking for what I want. I ask out a lot of people—I get few dates. My recent turn-downs have included: “I'm not ready for another relationship yet,” and “I'd rather be celibate,” (perhaps not in so many words, but the implication was there). Most often an invitation for dinner or coffee just gets ignored or avoided or bogged down in “this week's bad—maybe next?”

I'm also secure—and arrogant—enough to think it's not me. So let's just take it as an assumption that I'm datable. What I infer from these reactions is that there's a big mismatch between what I'm asking for and what people interpret what I'm asking for. “Another relationship”—does dinner imply a commitment? “I'd rather be celibate”—does coffee imply sex? Did I unwittingly profess my undying love?

What exactly do they think a “date” means?

Remember Archie Comics? Those eternally youthful teens from Riverdale that have been acting as wholesome role models for the prepubescent for generations? I have to admit, that's where I learned the meaning of “dating”. “Dating” was not a commitment. “Dating” did not mean someone was your boyfriend or girlfriend. “Dating” wasn't even monogamous! Archie dated Betty, Betty dated Reggie, Reggie dated Archie...well they did in my mind! Archie didn't have to hide the fact that he could never decide between Betty or Veronica. And neither Betty nor Veronica were obligated to sit around waiting for Archie to get off the pot.

“Dating” meant going for dinner (or a malt), seeing a movie, maybe flirting a little, maybe snoggin' a little outside the front door.... It was an opportunity to get to know someone better before the commitments began, not to mention to just have a little fun in someone else's company. It was not something serious. It had no major emotional investments.

When did it become such a big deal to go out on a date? My impression from the people that I know and ask out is that they'll wait until they find someone who matches their ideal—the man who they are ready to spend the rest of their life with—before they'll go out on a date. And on the other side of the coin, when someone asks them out (me, for example) they treat it as a confession of the same type. When there isn't an “ideal” match, it makes them backpeddle like they were about to soar off a cliff because they don't want to “lead anyone on.” It's almost like “going out for coffee” has become “moving too fast”.

This also seems to be the motivation behind the “avoid the question” reaction. Everyone wants to be nice. No one wants to hurt someone else's feelings by having to say “No, I don't want to go out with you,” face to face. But doesn't that imply that there's already huge emotional involvement in the question in the first place? It shouldn't be the same as breaking up a year long romance. Am I the only one in the world who would rather someone showed me due respect and gave me a straight answer instead of leaving the issue in eternal limbo? I think I'm more hurt by the fact someone thinks I can't handle the truth than by the rejection itself. Chemistry is a complicated and fickle thing—I know that and I don't hold it against people I ask out. Do you?

There's an obvious culprit for this change and I hesitate to bring it up because I'm not sure I like the implications. The sexual revolution is probably to blame. Compare Archie and his gang, to, say, the characters

on *Friends*. There's a similar ease to asking people out on dates and it's almost treated as casually for one or maybe two dates at least. But for the most part, the characters move serially from relationship to relationship—the only times they are shown pursuing something with more than one person at a time, it's part of a plot line; it's a big secret, a major life complication, and after a comedy of errors, they are forced to choose. Never do they date casually for any significant length of time.

So what's the difference? How can the Archie characters get away with such blatant polygamy? They aren't sleeping with each other, that's how. Doesn't that seem to be the transition point in *Friends* when the characters go from “dating” to being in a “relationship” when you really think about it? Whether we like it or not, whether we're straight or queer, sex carries with it an intimacy that implies commitment and, since sex has become a significant part of dating, it seems the meaning of “dating” has taken on connotations of commitment.

At this point, you probably sure I've taken leave of reality—what with the prominence of casual sex today. How can sex imply commitment? Casual sex is not just the other side of casual dating. Casual dating means going out with someone many times without a commitment. Having sex moves that into the realm of commitment. Casual sex means having sex with lots of different people without commitment. Sleeping with the same person more than once moves that into the realm of commitment. *The New Joy of Gay Sex* has a section for “f*** buddies”—men that just get together regularly for sex without commitment. But in these days when a huge portion of the community is actually out and not trying to simultaneously live in straight world, I think that “f*** buddies” are becoming a thing of the past. Stuart Allen Jones is a much more likely model for modern casual sex—and for him, hooking up with the same person more than once causes all sorts of complications.

So what does this mean? That all the right-wing moralists have been right all along? That sex should wait for marriage? That the fifties' image of courtship and dating is the one we need to adopt if we want to find successful relationships and happiness in life? I never thought that I would say something that could be interpreted as support for such a conservative view without major distortion, and I'm loathe to admit that it does. I still can't bring myself to suggest that such an image of relationships should be institutionalized culturally within the GLBT community and comprise a model

that we should aspire to.

So I guess all I can say is this: Christmas is approaching and, as usual for us single people, it can be more a time of loneliness and despair than of joy and happiness. I'm luckier than most because I have an exceptional relationship with my family and find joy there. However, when I fantasize about not being alone during the holidays the image I have of kissing under the mistletoe, or curling up in front of a fire is much closer to “casual dating” than “casual sex” and I think that I'd be more willing to forgo the sex than the romance. Wouldn't you? Couldn't we all bring a little more joy into each other's lives if we took invitations at face value and left the serious stuff until we were ready to be serious about each other?

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he's currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does Web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.

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