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From the Los Angeles Times

TELL

Dating etiquette never goes out of style

By Kathleen Clary Miller
Special to The Times

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Does anything resembling proper dating etiquette still apply in a society in which two incomes promulgate the Dutch treat? Is it considered rude to post pictures of your latest "hook-up" on your MySpace for all -- including the significant other you dumped two days ago -- to see? Modern dating seems to be a vast, boundary-less miasma ruled by a shortage of common courtesy and even shorter attention spans.

These are confusing times, to be sure, but then I ran across Elton Anderson of Missoula, Mont., who goes by the name Mr. Manners and runs an educational service by the same name (mrmannersetiquette.com). I wonder, do manners matter anymore? What's the protocol for pre-nuptial pillow talk? If it comes too early in the dating game, is a kiss still a kiss?

"It matters even more because we now profile rather than engage," Mr. Manners says. "And whenever you make a choice while dating, you must ask yourself, 'What is my intention?'"

My mother's mother asked my father that long ago, and long before he'd ever contemplated it himself, beyond the desire to hold my mother's hand. Asking for it in marriage hadn't occurred to him.

Some things never change, so how is a woman supposed to uncover a man's plans? But some things do: Now the man is wondering, what do women really want and how quickly can we figure it all out?

"Women still desire romance," Mr. Manners asserts, "and by the way, so do men."

But the only way to get there is slowly. When Mr. Manners suggests to a typical young woman that she maintain a perimeter around a dating proposal and not allow herself to slip into something more comfortable and compromising, she is confused.

"Young girls have no comprehension of romance," he says. And when he advocates that she "ascertain his veracity" by not allowing him to "enter her life other than in public for five months," does that apply to e-mail and her avatar?

It's all been reduced to materialism and efficiency as we profile our prospective partners like potential hiring candidates: What do you do? Where do you eat? What do you drive? Are we there yet?

As opposed to: Who are you, here in front of me as I look deeply into your eyes? Materialism, like speed, kills; there is no romantic glow unless you take it slow.

Because there is no benign conversation over cups of coffee or glasses of wine, "we miss the warming-through stages that allow the essence of the person to emerge," Mr. Manners says. Yes, it sounds old-fashioned, but so are the notions of lasting relationships and world peace.

The fundamental things apply, no matter when you stumble through the dating process, I suppose. It's true, guys, that any woman looks better by candlelight and so would rather be seen in it than just about anywhere else.

And even if we act confused, we do like a little late-night romantic music. You didn't know that? I have it on authority from Mr. Manners that you do too.

A sigh is just a sigh.

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