

What is it About Romance?

My teenage son has provided me with the insight that I have been unknowingly searching for all of these years.

I had a psychic reading done. Other than having my palm read when I was in college, this was a first for me. I was impressed with the psychic's ability to dive into my past, present and future. I don't know how accurate his reading is about my future, but boy was he right on about past and present events in my life! I was gleefully listening to all he was predicting until I heard him say, "You will be in a romantic relationship somewhere in the fall of this year."

Upon hearing these words, my stomach knotted, my jaw clenched, and beads of sweat popped out on my forehead. My visceral feelings of flight or fight were holistically apparent. I moaned into the phone audibly, and he asked, "You don't want a romance?" "No!" I almost screamed. He chuckled, assuring me that whether or not I wanted a romance it would be entering my life.

I have been thinking about this conversation with the psychic, and it has left me wondering why my reaction to a romance was and is so negative. I have told my friends for years now that I want nothing to do with a romantic involvement. "It simply isn't in the cards for me," I pronounce with an assured sense of knowing what my future holds. Well, apparently it is "in the cards" and I'm left holding a hand I don't know how to play.

I do know where the intense refusal of desiring a romantic involvement comes from, but I haven't wanted to tread those waters. Now I feel somehow forced into that turbulent tide by this psychic's prediction.

I thought about a peer training seminar I attended years ago. It was sponsored by the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) and our local amputee support group, Colorado Unlimbited Connection. I was a relative newbie to the amputee world at that time, and had no idea what or who the ACA was, and what the peer training session was all about. My rehab doctor knew that I wanted to help with new amputees,



talking to them about their emotional and physical well being and trying to lend comfort through my own experiences with limb loss. He recommended that I attend this training.

As the training began, participants were asked to introduce themselves. The introductions were coming fast and furious. I don't remember many of the people who were in attendance. What I do remember, however, was that they all introduced themselves as "amputees" and described which limb(s) was missing. When it got to my turn I told the group that this was the first time I had ever introduced myself by which body parts I was missing. I was equally humored and humbled by the impact my statement had on me.

I have relived this small yet profound experience over and over again through the past several years. The act of the introduction was not the point. The relative ease to which certain people could state that they were a "BK" (below knee), "AK" (above knee), or "upper extremity" amputee was the point. I was not at ease with referring to myself as an amputee, regardless of which remaining limbs I had intact. I remember thinking, "Is this what this training is all about? Am I here to be more at ease with this new body, and how it works?" I learned some valuable things that day, not only from the training, but from the attendees. Their ease with being amputees paved the way for my own self-acceptance. I began, that very day, to embrace the fact that I was now different.

I had, up until the day my amputations were done, lived my life in an able-bodied world. I never thought, or even considered that I would be anything different. But I now found myself surrounded by people surviving limb loss—amputees—and I finally recognized that I had become one of

them. I rolled the word “amputee” over and over again on my tongue, trying to get used to the way it sounded, and how it felt. I have to admit, it was not comfortable. The training provided me more than just the skills I needed to do visits with people who were facing amputation, or who were surviving amputation. It provided the safety net for me to begin a revelation of sorts.

And thus my transformation from the able-bodied world, which I was fighting to continue to be a part of, to a world I was fighting against being a part of, had begun. I realized that day that I had not fully accepted the fact that my affiliation had changed, and I needed to make a shift in my perception of myself and how I personally had perceived people with limb loss.

The total transformation has been a long time in coming and just recently I have begun to understand it from a totally new perspective.

My teenage son has provided me with the insight that I have been unknowingly searching for all of these years. As he is going through changes provided him by puberty, his ever-changing hormones and growing body have caused him to feel emotions from despair to pure unadulterated joy. He is learning daily how his new body works, and the emotional jumble that goes along with it. As I watch his transformation from boy to young man, I begin to acknowledge and embrace my own transformation from average Jane to amputee. My body, like my son’s, has undergone huge changes in the past years. The difference, of course, is that he is excited about his change. I have had to dig deep to find the acceptance in mine. The common denominator—change is inevitable—and there is no turning back.

So the question begs, “How do you live with such differences?” The first part of the answer is easy and now almost automatic. I live my life in gratitude, plain and simple. I’m grateful to be alive, experiencing my children’s lives and all that my own has to offer.

The second part is not as easy, and one I grapple with every day. It’s the body image part of the question—the part all amputees deal with when dealing with how their own body looks, in relation to others. I find myself, as does my son, unsure at times what this body will and can do. I find myself once again the teenager, wondering what people are thinking about how I look. It’s an uncomfortable feeling knowing that I’m closer to my golden years than puberty, yet I’m fighting those pubescent feelings of uncertainty and acceptance, all over again.

Fortunately I have wisdom and experience which comes with age, so being able to sort through my feelings—to rationalize—helps me find a comfort level within myself, and with those around me.

There are times when I think about having that predicted romantic relationship, and the thought literally fills me with



Cindy Charlton's transition from “able-bodied” to “amputee” has taken her on a life journey that has taught her much. The question she asks now is, “Am I ready for romance?”

dread. I haven’t fully dissected the fear, although I know part of it is the image I have of myself—strictly speaking, the body image. I think of my self-actualization as an amputee, my transformation from living in an able-bodied world to being in an amputee world, and I realize I am still the struggling teen trying to find where I fit. I have come to recognize that I actually travel in both of these places, as all amputees do, and I am not excluded from one solely by virtue of the other.

I can’t say for sure if I will ever be as comfortable in this body, minus three limbs, as I was in the one that accompanied me through my first forty years. And I don’t know if I will ever be comfortable enough with this body to chart the dangerous waters of romance. But I do know that this is what I am left with, and then the thought, which comforts me, and defines truly who I am comes to me. First and foremost, I am a survivor, and I think, “Thank God, I’m here at all.”

—Cindy Charlton