

ONE Going on Attachment Alert

At her sister-in-law's parties, Grace Weaver, a lonely 49-year-old divorcee and mother of a 12-year-old child, was looking for a "man to grow old with." Other relatives and friends tried to fix her up, but no dice. For several years now, she had not found "that certain someone," and time was getting on. So she tried a new tack.

I remember waking up the morning after going out to a New Year's Eve party. I felt disappointed I hadn't met any interesting men. I flipped on the television and watched a show on Internet dating. I'd always thought Internet dating would be tacky and leave me feeling icky, over-exposed, naked. But then this coach Evan Katz came on saying, "Come on, guys. There's nothing embarrassing about Internet dating." I jotted down his name and wondered if this shouldn't be my New Year's resolution: hire a coach, take control of my life.¹

She signed up for Match.com for \$17.99 a month.² She also hired Evan Katz, whose online name was E-Cyrano and whose Web site read: "I am a PERSONAL TRAINER for women who want to FALL IN LOVE." He offered her three coaching packages: Basic, Premium, and V.I.P. She chose the \$1,500 Premium package. For this, Evan would write her profile for the online dating Web site, pick her headshot from LookBetterOnline (a photo service for online daters), create an alluring user name, write a catchy subject line, and advise her further on what to talk about on and offline. The entire service consisted of friend-like conversations by phone and e-mail between Grace in New Jersey and Evan in Burbank, California.

In her selection of Evan's Premium package, Grace was deciding how much to put herself in Evan's hands and how much she would do herself. To the extent that she put herself in Evan's hands, she also accepted his guidance about how to feel. He started with how to feel about the very act of hiring him: "Congratulations for hiring me," he said. "Don't feel ashamed." In a separate interview, Evan told me, "I'm everybody's dirty little secret."

Clients kept mum about hiring Evan, he thought, because they felt they should be able to find a romantic partner in a natural way—through friends, family, work, or church. He was right. When she told friends she had hired a love coach, they said, "You're hiring a *what?*" But Evan told her to feel good about taking matters into her own hands by hiring him. Evan was changing the rule on shame: do not feel it.

He also recommended that Grace be wary of trusting a sense of "falling in love," of rushing into the idea that she had met her soul mate. "If you sense yourself feeling that," he suggested, "it's probably infatuation." Paradoxically, he even warned Grace against the messages in the ads of his fellow love coaches: "Find your soul mate. Find perfect chemistry. Fall in love." "Soul mate" is a retrospective concept, Evan cautioned. "Only when you look back after twenty years together, do you say, 'We've been soul mates all along.'" So Evan invited Grace to reinterpret what she had once defined as "true love" as being "infatuation."

Eager clients project onto their on-screen suitors all the wonderful attributes they so hope to find. So he cautioned Grace: "Keep a check on

your dreamboat fantasies. Go slow. Don't be too eager." Grace might wishfully fantasize that the man she sipped wine with by the fire in her brother's living room was "the one," Evan counseled, but this would be a bigger problem when Grace clicked her way through hundreds of profiles of online strangers. Her hopes could be wildly unrealistic, he explained:

Women come into my office with long lists of characteristics they want: the man should be successful, tall, handsome, funny, kind, and family-oriented. Does he like to dance? Is he a film aficionado? A real reader? They want a charismatic guy who doesn't flirt, a successful C.E.O. who's home at 5:00 p.m. Some women price themselves out of the market, and they're very touchy about not wanting to settle for less than the complete list that they believe promises a soul mate and chemistry. Then a lot of people get discouraged and conclude it's impossible to find real love.

Grace could imagine she had experienced a magical moment shared with the man of her dreams, only to discover it was all an illusion. So she needed to work out new terms of emotional engagement. How emotionally attached to an on-screen man should she feel at that first exchange? On the first date? The second? The third? Evan advised her on how attached to let herself feel by comparing dating to work at a job. Dating as work? Okay, Grace said, "I'm an engineer, so it was easy for me to think of dating as work. Just get it done. I know that sounds unromantic, but that's okay so long as I get to my goal. Evan kept my nose to the grindstone."

We usually think of meeting a person to go on a date—a hike, a picnic, a restaurant dinner, a play—as a voluntary and pleasurable act. Indeed, we imagine pleasure as the very purpose of it. To compare dating a potential partner to the tedious turn of a grindstone is to say, in effect, "Don't expect this to be fun."

Others writing on Evan's online blog also approached dating as work: "I keep plugging away, TableForSix [a service that sets up dinners with other singles], poetry readings, volunteering, it's hard work." Others did not agree: "Looking for love is *not* like work," one wrote defiantly. But Evan told Grace that dating was work—and that she *should not resent it*.

Indeed, part of the emotion work Evan was asking Grace to do was to try feeling upbeat about the fact that dating was work:

When you're unemployed, what do you do to find work? When you are single, what do you do to find love? I'm not telling clients to spend forty hours a week looking for love, but I tell them, "You can give it three. Do the numbers—and don't resent it."

Another way Evan prepared Grace for the online dating market was by asking her to think of herself as a brand:

The Internet is the world's biggest love mall. To enter it, you have to brand yourself because you only have three seconds. When I help a client brand herself, I'm helping her put herself forward to catch that three-second glimpse, and I'm helping her footnote the rest. A profile could say, "I talk about myself a lot. I go through bouts of depression, and Zoloft usually works." That might be the truth, but it's not going into her brand.

Like an object for sale, Grace had a label, Evan explained, and it had to grab attention. About her online profile, he said, "Don't hide behind generalities like 'fun-loving' and 'musical.' Bring out your *real* self. Put *that* into your brand." At the same time, he felt it was important to set boundaries on this public "real self" in early e-mail conversations with men. When Grace suggested telling about a stint at a Buddhist monastery where she was asked to clean a bathroom with a toothbrush, Evan replied, "That's a little out there." Grace prepared to emotionally detach from possible responses to that "real Grace" *and* to put that real Grace out there. That was Evan's counsel: be interested, of course, but stay detached.

Then there were numbers. As Evan explained, even if Grace did not think of herself as, say, a "6" on a 0 to 10 scale, numbers still applied to her. She should know about them because she was in a market and they reflected her market worth:

In the eyes of many men a "10" woman is 24 years old, never married, has a sexy 36-24-36 figure, Nicole Kidman face, warm personality, a

successful but flexible career, and a love of gourmet cooking. As a “10” she would score the highest number of male responses on Match.com.

Grace was very pretty and sexy, but she was 49 years old, divorced, and had little time for gourmet cooking. So, Evan surmised, maybe she was a “6.” He added, “I see a lot of 5 men looking for 10 women, and that leaves the 4 and 5 women in the dust.” So Grace had to try to detach her feelings of hurt pride from “Grace-as-6.”

In all of this, Evan counseled Grace to think about her ROI—return on investment—of time, thought, and emotional involvement. If a man was not right for her, she needed to keep an eye on the clock and move on.

Dating as work, dating as branding, dating as becoming a 5 or 6 in the eyes of others, dating as calculating her ROI, this was the market perspective Evan invited Grace to adopt. It called on her capacity to detach feeling from the idea of herself as a brand and as an ROI collector as well as from any given suitor.

In a grocery store, certain tacit feeling rules apply while transacting business: be friendly and pleasant with the checkout clerk. In the time you have, you can talk about the weather, the Dodgers game, or the taste of a new pesto, but do not get deeply involved. The clerk is doing a job and so are you. If you care too much about the clerk, it hurts the transaction, becomes a problem, and makes you seem strange. The basic feeling rule governing market transactions is to stay fairly emotionally detached.

We cannot apply the cheerful detachment we feel for a checkout clerk to a lover, spouse, parent, or child, of course, without something being haywire. However ambivalently, to them we usually feel deeply attached. Between these two boundaries—one demarking “too much” feeling and the other “too little”—flow all our feelings as we encounter the situations of life.

After Grace had written her profile, posed for her photo, and written her subject line, she panicked. As she recounted, “It was hard to push the button. That was my photo, and there are 20,000,000 viewers who are going to see it. What if some creep downloads my photo? I work in a

state office building. What if someone walks in and recognizes me? It made me squirm." She had placed herself before strangers, some of whom could pose a terrible danger. People she knew could recognize her and disparage her as "desperate." But Evan told her to plunge ahead. He was the pro, and she trusted him.

Once she began to correspond with potential suitors, Grace kept notes of how many responses she received daily. When she first got on Match.com she was 49 years old, and she was delighted to receive many responses. On her next birthday, she changed her online age to 50; to her horror, the responses plummeted. "It was like my stock price fell overnight. 'What happened?' I asked myself. 'I'm the same person I was a day ago, but my ratings fell by half.'"

Ratings fall in face-to-face encounters, too, of course. Grace might have been braced against a dismissive glance from a man she had met at her sister-in-law's party, but on Match.com Grace was in the "world's largest love mall," as Evan called it; the fall may have been more impersonal, but it was still hurtful. She needed to remain partially detached from any wishful fantasies she projected onto a string of e-mails from a suitor because he, too, was on the market. He might be lying about himself and declaring his undying love to five other women. Was she projecting? she had to ask herself. Evan told the followers of his Internet blog that they often took Internet dating rejections *too* personally, and they suffered accordingly. One woman, who described herself as "nice, average looking, intellectually fun and creative," wrote, "I am SO SICK of these men who are fives (or lower) who think they're going to wind up with supermodels." She felt over-entitled men were passing her over, and that made her mad. But anger violated Evan's feeling rule: be upbeat and mildly interested but basically detached.

So when was the coast clear to feel open hearted? Grace wondered. Evan said this:

People get very confused. They want to know when a relationship is serious. A relationship isn't real until you have committed to being boyfriend or girlfriend. Everything prior to that—phoning, emailing, dating, preliminary sex—all that isn't real until you have each

committed. I've had clients devastated to realize that they've fallen in love with someone who is still looking online.

All of Evan's lessons about what, when, and how much to feel gave Grace a kind of user's guide to Internet dating, setting out new rules of emotional engagement. With the shrinking of what the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas calls "the life world" and the rise of the "system world" (which includes the market, state, technology, and media), people like Grace find themselves situated at the crossroads where the two meet—even as those spheres are themselves in flux.³ Increasingly, people ask themselves, Should I prepare for a purely market transaction and emotionally detach? Or am I among friends, family, or community, in which case I should prepare myself to feel emotionally attached? What *mix* of market and personal should I prepare for, and what *measure* of attachment?

Grace saw Match.com as a means to an end. Alarm bells went off when she realized that, in the case of two suitors, one after the other, the means—the application of a market way of thinking—got stuck to the end: love. Before she met the man to whom she is now happily committed, Grace had had half-year relationships with two other suitors. Each had ended the relationship because he could not get along with her pre-teen daughter who disliked them both. As each one ended his relationship with Grace, he made the same parting remark.

It was eerie. The first guy said, "I'm getting back on Match.com. It was so easy to find you, there must be others out there just like you." He came back three months later saying, "Oh my God! What did I do? There's no other you out there." I told him, "It's too late. I'm not dealing with someone who thinks people come in facsimiles." It was very weird, but the second guy said exactly the same thing as he left, "It was so easy to find you. I'll find another."

Both of them saw her "like a box of cereal on the shelf," she felt. "Just like me? What were they thinking?" It was as if one could exchange one "6" for any other "6."

A market way of relating to others is brilliantly suited to the purchase of a washing machine, a cell phone, or a hat. The idea of a 1 to 10 rating, a

brand, and an ROI—all of these ideas are a good fit with the act of buying such things. But how do they fit romantic love? Grace wondered. Evan offered a market way of thinking as a *tool* for temporary use in finding a romantic partner, not as an end in itself. But what if some people keep using this tool long after the task has been accomplished? What if they apply ROI, branding, and 1-to-10 thinking to love itself? That was the problem.

Grace didn't want to get hurt but she didn't want to become heartless. So how attached did she dare to feel to a given suitor? To Evan? To herself? As with other Americans today, Grace was moving in a world of increasingly specialized market services—themselves set within a larger cultural remix of market and personal life (see chapter 7). She was calling on rules governing precisely how much or how little to care.⁴ No one needed to care about a “6,” but Grace wanted an open-hearted man to care about *her*.

GOING ON “ATTACHMENT ALERT”

At the most primal level, emotional engagement is a matter of attachment and, as such, a matter of survival. As the University of Chicago experimental psychologist John Cacioppo and his coauthor William Patrick show in their book, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, human beings share with nonhuman species strong responses to isolation or rejection.⁵ According to their research, the more isolated people are, the less well they sleep, the higher their anxiety, the less well-functioning their immune system, and less well-regulated their glucocorticoid response. Isolated individuals show higher rates of sickness and, in older adults, higher rates of death. Not just isolation but loneliness creates a wear and tear on the body. Loneliness is as harmful to health, the authors report, as high blood pressure. It does twice as much harm to health as obesity and the same degree of harm as cigarette smoking. When Cacioppo hypnotized people once to feel lonely and once to feel among friends, big differences showed up in their physiological responses. When lonely, the subjects developed greater reactivity to stress and higher cortisol levels. And people are not the only ones:

when isolated from others of their kind, Cacioppo reported, even fruit flies die sooner.⁶

Within families, small children exhibit different kinds of attachment to their primary caregivers, as the researcher John Bowlby argued based on his study of World War II war orphans. And, like children, adults express different styles of attachment in their search for love.⁷ But each style of attachment—say, the “anxious-preoccupied” or “dismissive-avoidant”—is not simply a state that we are inside or outside of. We continuously shape our attachments as we go along, sensing when we are “over-attached” or “under-attached.” Such sensings send a signal: “anxiety and fear coming up” or “no worries here.” If we become too detached, we fear sadness or depression. If we become too attached, we fear engulfment or loss of self. Our alarm system warns us to engage in some sort of restorative strategy in order to return to the degree of attachment to others that, as adults, we feel we need.⁸

For *The Outsourced Self* (2012), a book about clients’ and practitioners’ experiences of intimate services, I explored how people *draw lines*, at different moments and in different ways, between *themselves* and *symbols* of connection to others. It is as if people asked themselves, “Am I too detached from this symbol of connection to others? Or too attached?” Even apparently minor symbols of attachment seemed to matter. For example, one long-hours businessman hired a dog-walker to walk a beloved family dog on weekdays, but he raised his voice excitedly as he explained, “But not on Saturday or Sunday. If people go out and buy a dog and decide to care for it, I don’t see how they could hire someone to walk it on Saturday. After all, it’s their dog. Otherwise, why *have* a dog?” To him, walking the dog himself on Saturday, or seeing others do so, signaled attachment to the dog, and all the dog meant to him—a sense of home, belonging, warmth, devotion.

Another man, whose neighbors routinely hired birthday party planners to stage their children’s parties, clung defiantly to the idea of *not* hiring one for his daughter’s upcoming fifth birthday, and of instead planning it himself. He could afford to hire a service, but why do it? It was a powerful symbol, so he felt, of his attachment to his daughter and to the idea of himself as a “hands-on dad.”

A third person drew the line on emotional detachment in the simple act of buying a gift for a colleague's new baby:

The wife of a colleague had just given birth to a new baby. They had set up a gift registry at Babies "R" Us, so I went to my computer and clicked on the registry. There were about a dozen choices. I didn't want to pick the most expensive, since I don't know the couple that well. But I didn't want to be cheap, so I didn't choose the least expensive thing either. I aimed for something in the middle, gave my Visa details, and that was that. But then I felt strange. I hadn't visited the baby. I hadn't gotten in the car. I hadn't looked over toys or baby clothing. I hadn't wrapped the gift or written the card. I didn't deliver the gift. I hadn't even called to congratulate them on the birth! A month later I couldn't remember what the gift was, only how much it cost. So I bought some little plastic measuring spoons, got in the car, and paid the family a visit.

If she could not even remember what she had given, this woman wondered, had she really *given* a gift at all? For a warm-hearted person, that felt too cold. So she did things—bought the plastic spoons, paid a visit—to express the degree of warmth that seemed right to her. She sensed that she had been too detached from the colleague, the mother, the baby, and the very idea of herself as a loving person. So she made up for it.

People also guarded against over-attachment. One kindly woman who was coping with both a husband and son in ill health drew the line at taking on an ill niece. "I'm a show-up person," she declared, "but I can't worry about Lily now. I have to watch that I don't over-extend." She had overextended herself in the past:

I was helping so many people, I felt like the old woman who lived in a shoe. Partly, it was a matter of timing; within one week, bad things happened to three people I love. But partly I just have to watch that I don't over-do, because I get exhausted and then resent it—which I hate because then I'm not helping anyone.

We each set up terms of emotional engagement. We listen for bells signaling an "attachment alert." In response, we extend our attachment here, decrease it there, to maintain those terms. Consciously or not, we try to avoid feelings of anxiety, fear, or sadness, which tell us when we

have reached our symbolic limit. It is our desire to avoid those feelings that motivate us to work as hard as we do to set up the right degree of attachment to the world.

Most of the time, we do not notice what sets off our moments of attachment alert, nor could we coherently describe the exact terms of emotional engagement that these alerts help us maintain. It is only when we *cross over* one of the invisible boundaries between emotionally engaged enough and not enough that we find ourselves estranged—or, like Grace, in the company of others who are. An attachment alert goes off inside us not so much in response to what we are feeling as much as in response to *how much* we feel anything at all. As intimate life moves into the market, we continually ask just where, on the banks bordering this wide channel, it feels right. As the market frontier moves, so too does the language, the way of thinking and talking about relations, and the feeling rules that influence just what degree of attachment “feels right.”

In recent years, we have seen a rapid growth in personal services such as that which Evan offered Grace. Childcare workers, potty trainers, closet organizers, photo album assemblers, personal shoppers, physical trainers, eldercare workers, and grave beautification services now do what families, friends, and neighbors used to do in many communities (or which might not have gotten done at all). Such services save time, provide skill, and often help. But they also separate us from the acts by which we used to say how much we care. They shake up our terms of emotional engagement. This shake-up can alienate us from ourselves and others, but more often it sets us to doing the strangely invisible work of shoring up our bonds, in order to keep our personal life personal.