



# LOWER YOUR MASK

I look across in shock and horror at the man who is one of my co-participants in a spiritual dating workshop day called Meetings without Masks. A romantic, moi? I once beat some boys from Bolton at a contest to discover who was the Tequila King of the World (yes, it was indeed me); I spent a summer lugging cement around on a building site; I can humanely remove a spider, no matter how large and hairy, from any place you care to name; and I am as emotionally retarded as they come.

A romantic is surely a girly girl, not the lad's ladette that I regrettably believe myself to be. But then I thought about it. I've just spent the last five minutes talking about the tactile beauty of correspondence cards – letterpress ones. It is the first group exercise of the day. We are split into groups of two men and two women and we take turns talking about what we'd have brought with us today if we wanted the others to know more about us. So maybe I am a romantic.

We are here to learn more about ourselves and to approach dating in a more heart-centred way. It is described as 'naked dating' but with your clothes on. It is all about letting your guard down and feeling safe to explore intimacy with others. It absolutely terrifies me.

There are about 30 or so of us at this workshop, an even number of men and women – all single. I have already noted that the men are a bit different to the sort of guys I usually date. For a start, they are smiling rather than smouldering, they are all shapes and sizes rather than the great big hulking men I tend to go for, and they seem somehow more optimistic and bright-eyed than the cynical, cruelly witty men I

Dating can be fraught with fears and pretensions. Tania Ahsan attends a workshop that tries to get you to see love in a more authentic and open way



f\*\*k?!" and my heart is thinking: "No, I definitely don't want a dog type of man". The man in question is keen to point out that he was seeking unconditional love, the way that dogs have for humans, and I could tell my rabbit had disappointed him somewhat. Why had I chosen a rabbit? I chose to be a rabbit because I am scared and inhibited. A bit of nose twitching is the best you can expect from me in the sort of exercise that makes me feel very uncomfortable and wrong-footed.

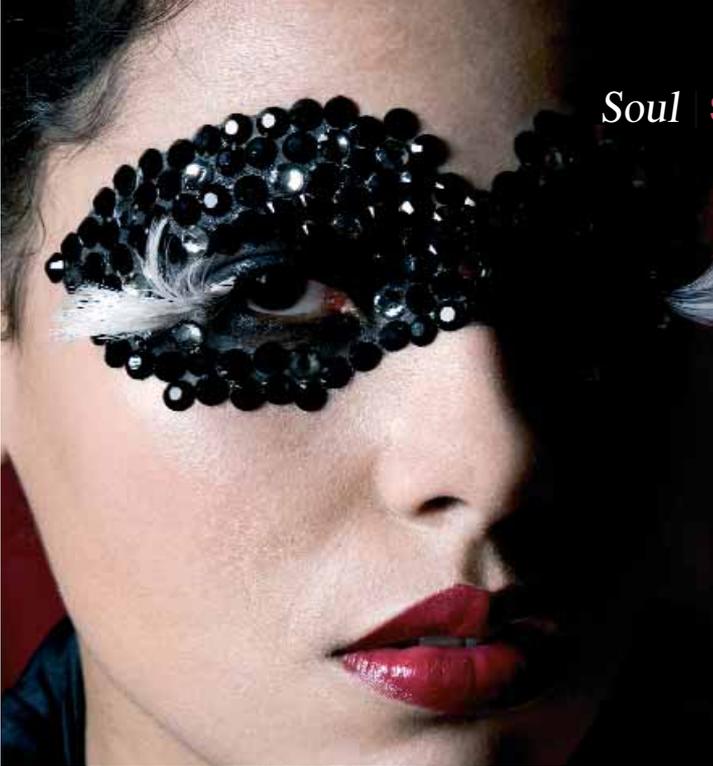
Our workshop leader, Jan Day, is keen to break down this resistance to expressing yourself that she often sees in more hesitant attendees. She hopes that through creating a relaxed environment and introducing fun activities, she will get people to think a bit outside the box about what they want from a relationship.

lob my heart at on a regular basis. I am curious as to how this will work – can I fancy someone who doesn't see dating as a bloodsport?

The day progresses through a number of exercises, some of which thrill and inspire me, others which thoroughly alarm me. At one point I have a man at my feet pretending to be a dog urinating against the wall while I, a rabbit, am twitching my nose at him in a fearful manner. My mind is screaming: "You're an adult! What the

There is a simple yet bizarrely erotic exercise that she asks us to do with a strawberry. We each get a big, juicy strawberry and we have to smell, taste and eat it as slowly and as sensually as possible. "Perhaps you might just want to lick it at first..." purrs Jan. I see what I can only describe as a pornographic strawberry-eating incident to the right of me and decide to eat my strawberry with my eyes closed. There's lots of giggling going on but I have to admit I'm fairly

“You can’t love  
someone else until  
you learn to love  
yourself”



certain I'd walk out of a date if a man started having that much fun with his fruit salad in front of me. I feel like a complete prude and just can't seem to lower the mask that this workshop is supposed to be helping me lose.

I wonder if I'd be more open to the exercises if the male participants were more 'my type'. I find that I am developing crushes on the women who seem infinitely more my cup of tea.

One lady talks about her love of finding dusty old editions of Shakespeare's plays and I swoon in adoration. I love dusty old editions too. I begin to find that the women on the workshop are revealing as much to me about what I like and who I am as the men are. This is certainly something I hadn't expected as all previous dating events have focused on finding a man, not finding out who you are as a person. It is really quite refreshing and different.

At one point we are asked to get into male and female only groups and to discuss what we like about the opposite sex. I realise that the things I like about men are those things that most women absolutely hate. The bossiness, the bravado, the pig-headedness that other women find infuriating about men is

exactly what I look for in a partner as, to me, those are masculine traits and they signal a man who is 'manly'. The other women do look at me as if I'm a little loopy as the general consensus is that women like men who are 'sensitive' and 'caring'. Gah! I always think 'wimp' when I think of the word 'sensitive' in relation to a man. It is an association that should perhaps be broken given the number of bad relationships I've had with actively insensitive men.

Jan sees these sorts of prejudices all the time. "Men think they need to be with a blonde or women think they need a 6ft man but what people think their partner should be like gets in the way. You're operating on criteria that is not to do with a true connection or authenticity and love." So if my authentic need for love isn't

about finding a Neanderthal man, what am I looking for? This is probably the real gem at the heart of this day – you begin to question what you really want in a relationship.

The afternoon – after a truly sumptuous vegetarian lunch – is made up of individual 'meetings', which are a bit like speed dating but without the speed. You get a number of minutes to meet with a man chosen randomly and you either do an exercise (like a dance) or talk about a particular subject. One of the unique elements of the workshop is that you fill in a card for each of the people you meet on the day. You can put on the card something positive about the person and you can also indicate if you'd like to stay in touch either as friends or to explore something more and give your contact details. There is a

board with envelopes marked with the names of all participants at the front of the room so you can discreetly drop your note in at any point during the day.

I can think of lovely things to write about everyone I met that day but I only gave my contact details for the purposes of a date to one man, mainly because we had a couple of coincidences come to light in our meeting – mutual acquaintances and things of that ilk. He also gave me his details but as a friend rather than as a date. I must admit that left me feeling a bit embarrassed so I didn't contact him and he hasn't contacted me. 'Spiritual' dating does not give you a Teflon heart and, much like conventional dating, you have to be prepared for the odd knock-back – though here it is described as simply 'not working together' which takes the sting out of the tail a bit.

Jan admits that the day is a challenging one. "Participants go deep into themselves and that work brings up things that are not so easy. It is not an easy day. But people are encouraged to be whoever they are and that it's okay to be the way they are." The aim of the day is in fact to get you to start loving yourself just as you are and – as we all know – you can't love someone

else until you love yourself.

So, did the day cure me of my predilection for grumpy, insensitive, Alpha males? I am currently dating a 6'4" hulk of a man who is smiley, kind, sensitive and caring – albeit a little bossy. I do believe that's what you'd call progress.

## HOW TO HAVE A GOOD FIRST DATE

Try this self-help technique from Jan Day to make sure you have a fab first date

We often make the mistake of having too many expectations about a first date. As a result, we put unnecessary pressure on ourselves and the person we're meeting. Our critical voice can take over in a way that is destructive to the idea we have in our head of ourselves and our date. This exercise encourages a shift of focus.

- Start by writing down key words or phrases where you deeply appreciate yourself.
- Be generous; write everything you like and value about you, what fascinates you about yourself, and your achievements in life. Use coloured pens, and fill a page with self-praise.
- When you've finished, admire it, add more to it, and totally relish it. Now you can approach your date feeling wonderfully positive about yourself. On the date itself, try to do the same exercise mentally with him or her. Be truly curious and interested by them and all they are. Be willing to appreciate them. You'll enjoy yourself so much more. And so will they – whatever the outcome.

### More information

Jan's forthcoming workshops include: **Meetings without Masks (singles only)**, 6th February, London. **Inviting Intimacy (singles and couples)**, 17th to 20th February, Dorset. **Being in Love (singles and couples)**, 19th to 20th March, near London. For more info, call 020 8123 9831 or go to [janday.com](http://janday.com) or [meetingswithoutmasks.com](http://meetingswithoutmasks.com)