

Facing my fears

Finding a spouse through online dating

Margaret De Jong

An unexpected awakening

About eight years ago, I was on a week-long personal retreat of prayer and solitude. As an introvert, I considered this delectable spiritual food. After several days of Scripture reading, praying, journaling, and walking in God's beautiful creation, I had an unusual early morning awakening. It was before dawn, and I found myself in tears with a heavy heart. That was so out of character for me. I am typically a genuinely joy-filled person, although sad situations can certainly lead me to cry. But to wake up in tears? Where was that coming from?

As I journaled about my unexpected sadness, several issues surfaced, particularly related to my ministry setting in Senegal. I had been there close to six years, and this retreat time was showing me I had some deep wounds to address before returning to Senegal for another season of work. But what surprised me even more, as an independent single person, was the realization that I was sad to not have a spouse with me on my life's journey.

Thankfully, I still had a couple days left of the retreat to process my feelings related to my singleness. I don't want to say I was afraid to be single because I wasn't; I had clearly proven myself capable of life as a single. Nor was I looking for someone to complete me, even though popular culture here in North America, as well as in other places I have lived, gives the message that you need to be paired up with someone to be normal and happy. I knew my wholeness comes through my relationship with my Creator and no one else. Sadly, many singles do not understand that only God can meet all their needs. Although worship and Scripture point to contentment in God, the message of many church-goers is that you need to find a mate to be happy, and you are abnormal if you are single.

Although I was blessed with many wonderful housemates over the years, I was sad to not have a more permanent life companion. I had heard enough from others to know that marriage was much hard work,

but plenty of energy also goes into getting to know a new living mate every year or two. I wanted to be with someone for the long haul, to have years of shared experiences and support through life's ups and downs.

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spouse? I was doing a lot of work for the Lord, so couldn't the Lord do this for me? However, the Spirit nudged me to recognize that I was trying to find favor with God through my works, and I confessed my self-righteousness to the Lord of grace. Then I found myself struggling with other questions: How important is this desire for marriage? What if I meet someone who is not a missionary? Am I willing to leave missions to be in a long-

term relationship? Then the deeper question surfaced: How much of my identity is in my role as a missionary rather than in my relationship as God's beloved child? And that is when I felt fear.

Releasing my fears to God's love

I was afraid to leave missions, because I didn't know anything else. My adult life had been focused overseas. So much of my identity, and the identity of my closest friends, was that of missionary and international worker. I considered myself a hardcore missionary and was concerned that others might think I could no longer hack the challenging lifestyle and work. And I wondered how I would adapt to being immersed in North American culture, which in many ways was now foreign to me. But in the midst of acknowledging those fears, I sensed a flood of God's love upon me, and knew that being God's beloved child was enough.

Single or married? It didn't matter. I was God's beloved child. Missionary or not? It was of no consequence. Being in God's love was all sufficient.

But another fear surfaced: admitting to others that the strong independent woman didn't necessarily want to be so independent anymore, that she was recognizing she desired a life companion. Peeling off the layers of my self-made identity was scary. What would people think of what lay beneath? But during this holy moment I was so enveloped by God's

love that I was able to release my fears. I knew God loved me as I was, and that was all I needed.

This retreat was an epiphany for me that came out of intentional, extended time with the Lord, away from my usual work and routines. In Scripture we repeatedly see the command to not be afraid. Clearly, living in fear is not God’s intent for us. Yet how can we release our fears if we don’t even know they are there? While engaged in many ministry activities, I had been unaware of some of my deepest emotions and fears. As embodied beings, our emotions affect us in some way or another, whether or not we have identified them. In the busyness of our lives, each of us needs to find ways to slow down and pay attention both to God and to our own embodied self so that with God we can process and work through whatever is unconsciously weighing us down.

Entering the world of online dating

Having recognized my sadness of not being married, and willing to face my fears of sharing honestly with others, I then had new concerns related to finding a compatible mate. As my faith and faith values are the most important part of my life, I was unwilling to enter a relationship with someone of a differing belief system. In the region where I lived in Senegal, 99.9 percent of the population didn’t share my faith. And as any single woman missionary will tell you, single guy missionaries are few and far between. My prospects of finding a life mate in Senegal were close to nil.

I’d heard of various online dating sites, yet I was afraid to be seen as one of those desperate people who would do anything to find a spouse. But then I heard of several friends and acquaintances—people who I respected—who found their spouses through online dating, and I finally, timidly decided to try it out. Little did I know that I was ahead of the times. Online dating has since taken off, especially among the young. In the United States in 2018, 30 percent of those ages eighteen to twenty-nine years were using online dating sites or apps.¹

There are thousands of dating sites and apps out there, and they differ greatly in how they operate and to whom they cater. I was concerned with using a site where persons were looking for relationships that could lead to marriage. In exploring a handful of such sites, I found significant differences in how the sites provided you with matches: from those that

¹ “Online Dating: Statistics and Facts,” *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/top-ics/2158/online-dating>.

simply provided you with all site users who were in your defined gender, age, and geographical range, to those that used an algorithm that required users to complete a preliminary questionnaire that the site claimed would lead to highly compatible matches. I noticed a significant difference in the quality of people's profiles from site to site: those who were using free sites that required little information from the users typically did not come across as strong candidates for a healthy relationship, whereas those using sites that required a fee and preliminary reflection by the user appeared more likely to take seriously the hard work of relationship building.

Online dating is a huge industry with frequent changes. The site I used no longer boasts the aspects I appreciated most about it: it has significantly reduced the number of questions it uses for its matching algorithm



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and no longer offers many of the steps of guided communication that were one of its key features in the past. I share this to make two points. First, the online dating industry is ultimately more concerned with meeting the demands of today's consumer than with the hard work of relationship building. Second, these sites change rapidly, and we cannot assume that how a site worked yesterday is

how it will work today. Anyone exploring online dating needs to critically evaluate the sites as they currently operate.

One of my fears of using this medium was the potential for scammers. On several occasions, I had persons communicating with me, but I sensed discrepancies in their writing style from one paragraph to the next. So I cut the section of their writing that seemed unusual, pasted it into Google, and found myself on the LinkedIn page of someone of a different name and an irreconcilable photo. I reported these issues to the dating site, and the persons were blocked from further communications on the site. A few times I received messages from matches that their subscription was about to expire, asking whether I could communicate with them via my personal email rather than through the site. The site I was using strongly warned against moving to personal email early in the relationship. I suspected these persons were phishing for personal information, and I did not oblige. I also concluded that if someone was seriously interested in me, they would be willing to pay for another month on the site.

When I was initially on the site, I was checking daily for communication from my matches, as I expected a quick result. After all, the internet has opened the way for instant shopping and instant messaging,

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so shouldn't it also provide an instant relationship? By the grace of God, I soon recognized that daily clicking onto the site was only leading to daily disappointment and discouragement. Thus, I personally chose to not visit the site more than once per week. I began to recognize how the online medium for dating easily malforms us to be impatient, rather than forming us to the Spirit-fruit of patience (Gal. 5:22). In addition, online dating is much like other online shopping: you

can be very picky about what you want, and at any time you may decide your commodity—whether it be a new relationship or your long-term spouse—needs an upgrade to the latest version on the market. To counter this malformation, the church must remain committed to teaching about the covenantal love that God has demonstrated toward us and that we are to demonstrate to the world in our marriage relationships.

Finding a spouse—online

Contrary to a quick result, I was on the site for several years before Jeff, who is now my husband, sent me a smile—and this just months after I had made the difficult decision to transition out of mission work and move back to Canada. As I had done with others who had contacted me, I was quick to ask Jeff to share with me about his faith walk. But unlike other persons who summed up their faith in a sentence or less, Jeff wrote a couple pages to share how surrendering to God has shaped his life. I was convinced that he was serious about his faith and was willing to explore our relationship further. But I still wanted to make sure that Jeff was the real deal. By knowing his first name, his profession, and the rural town where he lived, I was able to perform a Google search that quickly landed me on his professional page. I was happy to find a matching photo as well as other corresponding information.

Jeff and I recognized the limit of a medium that has one matched with someone he or she or their community has never met. We were unwilling to meet in person until we had communicated with each other's

references. Three persons who knew me well communicated with Jeff over email, answering his various questions about my character, and likewise I emailed some of Jeff's friends and family. We also had video chats with two other people.

Even though Jeff's references were all leading me to believe that he was a man of high character, I still wanted to be cautious about how we met in person. I had read of too many incidences where the first face-to-face meeting of an online relationship did not end well. Jeff affirmed my desire to be in a safe place, and on one of my trips back to North America, he met me for a weekend while I was staying with a friend who had already met Jeff via video. This was a perfect opportunity for my friend to get to know Jeff better and to offer her perspective and counsel.

After our initial meeting, Jeff and I continued in our long-distance relationship with occasional opportunities to see each other in person, typically while visiting each other's families and friends. Jeff also visited me in Senegal, staying with some of my colleagues. All these visits gave us opportunity to hear from others regarding our relationship. After more than two decades in community-oriented cultures, I was unaware—until recent conversations—how countercultural Jeff and I were to the privacy of Western individualism in the way we intentionally sought counsel from others.

Jeff and I also felt it was prudent to live in the same geographical location for a season, to see each other in day-to-day life rather than only when one or both of us were on vacation. I moved to Jeff's town for three months, staying with one of his church contacts. And near the end of that time—almost two years to the day after Jeff sent me his first smile—after considerable intentionality in how we went about our relationship, we became engaged. Several months later we covenanted before God and community to love each other until death separates us.

What I learned from online dating

My story demonstrates that online dating can work with appropriate cautions. In addition to safety precautions and concerns of how the digital medium malforms us, most significant is the importance of community input. Algorithms may match people in ways that dating sites consider



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highly compatible, but we need persons who know us well to speak into significant life decisions. Scripture points to the wisdom of many advisers (Prov. 15:22). I strongly encourage the church to face fears of singleness and online dating by calling all to live in the wholeness that is ours through God, to inform about the cautions of the digital medium, and to seek various ways to mentor and be a voice regarding all relationships—and all the more so for those that begin online.

About the author

Margaret De Jong lives in Fort Kent, Maine, with her beloved husband and precious stepson. They love the beauty and outdoor activities of the Saint John River Valley. Margaret spent twenty-two years in international work with Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mission Network and is currently completing MDiv studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.