

MEETINGS WITHOUT MASKS

MY SINGLES SUNDAY WITH RELATIONSHIP EXPERT, JAN DAY

by Rose Rouse

Why did I go to this one day Meetings Without Masks workshop at the Light Centre in Belgravia? Because recently, I've become too comfortable with being single. I'm happy – as in I have intimate, loving friends and an active creative practice, writing – but I wanted to get back into the river of male energy again in a less harsh way than internet or speed-dating.

When I arrive in the reception area, I notice how relaxed the atmosphere is. These workshops are gender-balanced and there are about forty of us – mainly 30s and 40s – milling around chatting casually. Wonderfully, there is not an atmosphere of focused chatting up or sexuality. Perhaps, it helps that it's a Sunday morning.

Jan – tall, friendly, open – who's been a facilitator for the past 10 years, gathers us together in a circle upstairs, and explains that, in fact this is not a dating day. "It is a day where you can explore what you would like in relationship," she says, "you might meet your future partner here, but even if you don't, you'll discover tools that you can use in finding the right relationship."

Of course, we are also eyeing one another up. I've already spotted a wavy-haired contender with a crinkly smile. And some great women. For me, this is not just about finding a man.

Ten minutes later, Jan invites us to form a mini-group of two women and two men, and to imagine ourselves as objects on a tray. She then asks us to take a turn each within the small group and talk about these objects. The gift, she urges, is often in the silence or awkward moments. I love our little group, we're all so serious and open-hearted about this task. Rebellious against my usual rebellion, I decide to obey the tray rules.

"I would have a deep red hibiscus flower," I say, "and it represents my exuberance, I would like my future partner to appreciate that side of me. And then I'd have a canal or a bit of the sea on there, to represent the other side of me. I'd also put a poem where I'd taken an emotional risk in writing it, as well as something to show the explorer in me." Whoops, four minutes of undivided attention from my group are sadly over. I love this session. We're all so passionate about who we are. Including one of the men who not only put photos of his family on there, but also a rock to represent despair.

Jan frequently alludes to it being a good idea to befriend those parts of ourselves we are taught so often to keep hidden – like sadness, shame, embarrassment – and so it's a great relief to be in this non-judgmental space. Several times, I feel moved as I speak.

Already feeling lighter, we meet in a second mini-group where we are asked to talk about what we want in a relationship. The first man talks about wanting to prioritise a shared sense of humour, co-support and being able to express his feminine side. At my turn, I find myself saying I would like 'easy love, not meaning casual but less tortuous'. I also talk about my son having a relationship, which I envy – and am aware I've been a positive influence – because his girlfriend and he are so co-creative and co-supportive. I feel tearful again as I speak. I'm happy for them, and in this workshop, I am also allowed to admit that I also feel some sadness for myself. In that I don't have that kind of a relationship.

After a few minutes of gentle dancing with the whole group, we are given a strawberry experience. An organic one! "Take in all its bumps, and its over-ripe bits," says Jan,

"and then I want you to really take in its smell and lick it, but don't eat it. The idea is to really spend time with this strawberry and eat it in the slowest possible way. You will never have had such a strawberry experience in your entire life."

It's true that my strawberry looks pretty disgusting, but it smells heavenly. Like a strawberry from my childhood. Finally, after waiting and delighting, I bite into it and the tiny sweet pieces explode with freshness in my mouth. It's like eating a strawberry for the first time in my life.

Jan has an intention with this exercise. It is that we treat all our future meetings with such tenderness and openness. Before lunch, we have another mini-group. This time, it's in our gender groups. We dwell upon what we love about men and vice versa. Then the men sit in the centre of the room with their eyes closed whilst the women shout out what we love about them. "I love your strength," says one woman. "I love your flirting," I say. "I love your body," says another. Someone even says: "I love your despair." Next, we exchange positions and the men speak out amazing words of love for women in a torrent. It's actually poetic and very moving to receive. One of them even says; "I love your rage" which feels fantastic. I love that they are so unafraid of what they appreciate about us.

At lunch downstairs – vegetable bake or moussaka – Jan encourages us to chat to as many people as possible. It feels unforced. And fun. I end up talking about 5 Rhythms dancing and loving food really means with regards to your body. Most people here have some kind of connection with yoga, 5 Rhythms, homeopathy, spirituality etc but they are definitely not hippies.

Afternoon is time for the ten minute meetings with around five men or women. Jan also introduces the idea of appreciation cards, which we can fill in and leave in envelope. She encourages us to write to as many people as possible. There are also cards where you can take more of a risk, and invite someone out for a coffee and

leave your details. This is a little scary, because of course, they don't have to respond. However, it is an invitation to step out of your comfort zone.

In these meetings, we get the choice of how close or distant we are. In words or silence. In dance or stillness. My first meeting is with the wavy-haired, groovy man that I felt drawn to initially. We dance together slowly gazing into each other's eyes. He seems unafraid and totally present. We smile a lot. We sit and have a little conversation. He seems to have done a lot of tantra work. We hug. I feel totally appreciated and met by him. It's a delight.

My other meetings are totally different. Just like strawberries. I dance playfully with one but we don't really have anything to say to one another. I am a goddess and he is the god with another, which is sweet. Then, I ask another to hold me, and he does. Finally, I become a deer in the forest with the last one. We talk about life experiences and it's fascinating how different each meeting is in its own delicious way.

The whole group meets in the circle for the last time. There's a surge of sadness, and then excitement as we say 'goodbye' and collect our envelopes. I try not to have any expectations, but am delighted when I see Mr Wavy Hair has left me his contact details.

Jan has managed to create such an open-hearted day without any dating pressure. Quite a feat. One man left me a message saying he loved 'my wild exoticism' so I would have to say – that it is an experience which gives me hope and inspiration with regards to future relationships.

*Course dates Sept 9th and Nov 14th,
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These workshops are bi-monthly at the Light Centre in Belgravia. More information at meetingswithoutmasks.com or janday.com Bookings 020 8123 9831.