

A SINGLE PROBLEM

JASON DILTS

“Looking for and finding love, it turns out, isn’t quite so easy. The romance narrative – found in movies, book, and magazines – is built on the idea that you’re no one until someone loves you. Without love, life isn’t even worth living. This trope is constantly re-enforced by social institutions (including religion and government), families, peers, and most of all, popular culture.”

For years, I had a single problem. From the moment I stepped out of the closet and admitted to myself that I was gay, I immediately began to feel insecure about not having a man in my life as a romantic partner. What began as simple adolescent insecurity developed into a complex as I grew into early adulthood. The older I got, the more deficient I felt for not having someone to love me. I was excelling academically in college, building a solid and successful career in politics, and establishing and developing very meaningful friendships. I had it all, or at least as much as anyone in their early twenties could expect to have. Yet, I felt as though my life was lacking in some way. No matter how good life was, this problem – this *single* problem – persisted.

I assumed that it would go away the minute I found someone to love me. All of my insecurities about my life, my looks, and my place in the world would be fixed the moment “prince charming” came in and swept me off my feet. Like so many young girls find themselves doing, I was waiting on the fairytale narrative to give my life meaning (as if a life without love was also one devoid of this alleged “meaning”). Never mind that I enjoyed my college classes and soaked up all the new theories and concepts I was learning. Never

mind that I loved my job managing and directing a local grassroots political party. Never mind the very deep and connected friendships I had built over the years. Never mind the fact that I actually liked living by myself, alone, in my own eclectically decorated and perfectly organized apartment. I was convinced that all these elements that made up my version of the “good life” were insignificant and meaningless. Under the ever-anticipated glow of love, I expected all my insecurities would just melt away.

What a crock!

Looking for and finding love, it turns out, isn’t quite so easy. The romance narrative – found in movies, book, and magazines – is built on the idea that you’re no one until someone loves you. Without love, life isn’t even worth living. This trope is constantly re-enforced by social institutions (including religion and government), families, peers, and most of all, popular culture. Most of us are taught unquestionably from a very young age that getting married and having children is something of a rite of passage into becoming a full-fledged “grown up.”

Our society constructs rituals and celebrations around this idea and exalts couplehood above all other forms of existence. It begins when we are young – when middle school dances and later high school proms are highlights of the academic year for many teenagers. Dating is all the rage among young peer groups as adolescent pairing off often equates to popularity and self-validation. This celebration of coupledness continues into adulthood when married people are thrown lavish parties to celebrate their dual partnerships, and when parents are rewarded with showers of gifts for their ability to reproduce. The celebration of couples is everywhere! Couples get parties – single people get pity!

Along the way, we are constantly reminded by popular culture that single equals deficient. There’s Celine Dion, who docilely sings “I’m everything I am because you loved me”, suggesting that all of our accomplishments are the result of someone else having romantic feelings for us. Avril Lavigne also doesn’t seem to be able to accomplish much on her own, at least not according to her song *When You’re Gone*, as she confesses

that when her lover is away, “I can hardly breathe I need to feel you here with me.” Jessica Simpson seems to think she can’t even stand up without a man, as she confesses in the lyrics of her song, *With You*: “I can let my hair down / I can say anything crazy / I know you’ll catch me right before I hit the ground / With nothing but a t-shirt on / I never felt so beautiful. Baby as I do now / Now that I’m with you.” LeAnn Rimes takes the cake, though, in *How Do I Live*, lamenting that she simply cannot physically live without her man. “How do I live with out you; I want to know; How do I breathe without you / If you ever go / How do I ever, ever survive / How do I / How do I / Oh, how do I live”. We can only hope that Ms. Rimes current relationship will never dissolve because she will apparently be dead if it does!

While these over-the-top lyrics might be dismissed as mere examples of a much larger genre of sappy pop-songs, they work in tandem with society at large to re-enforce the notion that a single person is not of equal value as a couple. Gradually, we learn and internalize the notion that what we accomplish on our own pales in comparison to what we accomplish by falling in love and tying the proverbial knot.

I tacitly adopted this ideology for years without realizing it. Throughout my late teens and early twenties, I developed intense crushes on a handful of guys that I desperately wanted to turn into romantic partners. None of them showed any real, substantive interest in me, though – yet I hoped that, by pining after them, somehow they would see just how great of a guy I really was. When efforts to “catch” the current object of my desire failed, I resorted to looking anywhere I could for companionship. I tried Internet chat rooms, on-line dating services, gay social organizations, and gay dance clubs. I didn’t find anyone who interested me in any of those places, though I did manage to snatch up a few dates.

One of these dates was with a guy named Kevin, who I met in an internet chat room in 2005. Kevin was an accounting major and worked in the business administration department of a local meat processing company. He was extremely attractive, and I was excited about the possible relationship that could develop between the two of us... That is, until he started talking.

His job seemed extremely boring to me, and he had absolutely no passion for it. Work was just something he did to make money.. He thought politics was frivolous. He also thought being an activist was futile. “I’ve never understood people who thought they could change the world,” he once confessed to me. “You’re just one person. Accept your place, make the best of it, and stop worrying about things you can’t control.”

As for his own hobbies and interests, he was pretty passionate about making money, he liked to party on the weekends, and he spent a lot of time at dance clubs. He didn’t open up much about his personal life; his style was more surface. He wasn’t interested in having deep conversations about art, literature, or world affairs. I had a hard time identifying with him. He didn’t “get” me at all, which was made perfectly clear when he referred to a women’s studies course I was taking at the time (and very passionately talking to him about) as a “lesbian class.” About the only thing we had in common was that we were both gay. Sharing the same sexual orientation is not exactly grounds for engaging in a life-long love affair. Needless to say, Kevin and I soon parted ways.

A few months later, there was Shaun, a tall, dark, and handsome nurse, whose body filled out a pair of scrubs in a way that made me want to instantly orgasm. We had an immediate physical connection. Unfortunately, everything else about him made me want to recoil. First, there were his politics. He was a member of the NRA, frequently complained about the “ugly, uncouth black kids” in his neighborhood, and didn’t understand why “gays were always complaining about not having any rights.” Like Kevin, he thought politics was a stupid, meaningless game and that feminism was just a crutch for people who couldn’t get laid. Then there were his interests. He was an avid sports fan, loved to go hunting, and had an affinity for action films and slasher flicks. As someone who has to be reminded that the Super Bowl is a football game, loathes the thought of handling a gun or shooting anything, and has my Tivo permanently set to record every zany, envelope-pushing, obscure indie movie on the Independent Film Channel, it was hard to find common ground. Despite the fact that we didn’t relate to each other

at all, my self-worth was so low that I continued to see him for an agonizing month.

Obviously, a big part of dating is getting to know the other person, and there are lots of facets that make up who we are as individuals. To that end, I invited him to my favorite restaurant on one of our first dates. I wanted to take him somewhere that was quintessentially “me.” We ate at the Green Mill, a bar and grill that had what I considered to be the best chicken wings in town and a place myself and my best friends had spent many nights in high school talking, laughing, connecting, and enjoying each other’s company. More than the food, it was the memories that made this restaurant special. During dinner, I recounted stories about my friends, our nights out, and why this particular place was so special to me – but I could tell he was bored and uninterested. He also complained about the food. After dinner, I took him for a walk downtown, along the river. This was also a special place for me, because I loved the scenery and had many good memories of times spent there with friends, as well as by myself reading or studying for classes in college. Despite my attempts to explain its significance, he remained underwhelmed. He was barely even listening.

Despite this, I wanted to give him a chance. On our next date, I asked him to take me to some of his favorite places. For dinner, he took me to Denny’s. I’ll confess that I’m not the biggest fan, but I wanted to get to know him – and supposedly this place was going to tell me something about who he was. I tried to stay open minded. When our dinner conversation began to lag, I finally asked him what made him choose Denny’s. I was hoping for a nostalgic story about late night dinners here with friends or memories of times spent eating here with his family. But as it turned out, he just liked thier onion rings. While I could appreciate his taste for fried food, I couldn’t help but feel that relationships weren’t exactly built on shared side dishes. Our “romantic night out” continued with a baseball game, where he said we could “spend time together.” Instead, I spent most of the game listening to him cheer and holler, only briefly separated by his futile attempts to answer my ignorant questions about what was going on in the field. After the game, he

capped it all off with a “nice night at home,” watching a slasher flick and eating beef jerky. That was the last night we ever spent together.

Despite my repeated attempts to find it, loved, it seemed, was rather illusive. I left these dead-end, haphazardly unromantic encounters feeling as though there was something wrong with me, and wondering why I couldn't find a guy with whom I could connect. While out on dates, I found myself fantasizing about being at home, alone, on my couch and watching whatever TV to DVD series I was obsessing over at the moment. Even the few moments that I did enjoy, I still thought to myself, albeit sheepishly, “I kind of like being alone better.”

I had to question, though: Was my desire for singlehood truly authentic? Or had it been self-manufactured as a survival mechanism? When I accepted being gay, I had to accept the fact that I would never have a family. Marriage for same-sex couples was a distant dream, and I knew that adopting children would be a long, arduous, and expensive process, complicated even further by the fact that there would be two men involved. I understood that I could have a “partner” and make a “special family”, but those terms seemed condescending. I wanted to be embraced and accepted. Along with that, I wanted to be able to use the same language to describe my relationship that everyone else gets to use! Marriage has certain social connotations that bring with it a level of respect to couples who enter in to these legal nuptials. I knew I would never have the real deal, and that my “partnership” with another man would never be accepted and celebrated like my heterosexual peer’s marriages.

Then came a magical day in late fall of 2003. The Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts had declared that preventing same sex couples from getting married was both discriminatory and unconstitutional. In an instant, a new door opened that I never could have imagined. Writing for the court’s majority, Justice C. J. Marshall exclaimed that, “Without the right to marry-- or more properly, the right to choose to marry--one is excluded from the full range of human experience and denied full protection of the laws for one's "avowed commitment to an intimate and lasting human relationship." For

me, it was that right to *choose* to marry that was most important. Although it was limited to just one state, and despite the fact that not a single state has granted full marriage rights since this decision, I can now choose to be married.

It was very important for LGBT people to have this choice. All of us want to know that the circumstances of our lives are a result of us having made our own decisions that brought us to the place we are in the present. Absent a choice, it is easy to categorize as deficient and less than desirable a life we can never have. Having access to marriage meant that this idea was now open for me to explore, and for a time I craved and hungered to live that life that everyone else had been living for so long. I looked for more dates and tried out more men, hoping that I would find the magical one who would whisk me away to the mythic land of Massachusetts where we would live happily ever after. Alas – my magic man never came, and I stayed grounded in my home, the heartland of Kansas. I had the right to choose, but no one seemed to want to choose me!

Throughout my quest for companionship, my aborted attempts at relationships, and later my rabid desire to exercise my new-found civil right to marry, there persisted a constant belief that it was my fault that no one loved me. I assumed that there must be something internally deficient within me that repelled people away and made me of no desire to other men. Ultimately, it was my body where I laid the most blame, and over time I grew to hate it. That hatred eventually manifested itself in the form of an eating disorder, and for an entire year I was quite literally starving for love. I thought that if I changed my body and became thin, my luck would change. I succeeded in losing weight – eighty pounds over 12 months to be specific – but even though the new lean and slender me took up less space, I still wasn't able to find someone who wanted to make room for loving me.

As my twenty-fourth birthday approached, I found myself increasingly unhappy and less fulfilled than ever. I discounted all of the wonderful things that I did have in my life, which by this time included a college degree, a great paying job, a nice apartment, and more friends than I ever could have

imagined, and pinned all of my despair on the one thing that I didn't possess. I agonized at the thought of another year passing without love, and bemoaned the idea that the next year could possibly be a repeat of all years prior. When my best friends took me out to dinner for my birthday, I wasn't really in a mood to celebrate. I was too perplexed by my single problem.

There's a funny thing about friendship, though. Sometimes it's the one thing you have that can bring you back to yourself. That night at dinner, after rehashing my standard monologue about how meaningless my life was without a man, my friends Edey and Mary firmly and assertively pointed out that I was missing the point about what mattered in life. There I was, having dinner with two people I had known since I was in high school. We had gone through ups and downs, crazy angst-ridden adventures, personal growth experience, parental conflicts, friendship drama, and shared just about everything with each other that people can share. We'd kept our friendship together through good times and bad, and knew each other better than we knew anyone else. Yet, I refused to recognize that the best of me was seated at that table. Who I am, the "me" that makes me is forever infused in these two people, and that's a powerful concept, more potent than the idea that another person's love completes you.

It didn't all come together that night, and I had many more months to go in my journey, but gradually I began to understand my *real* problem – and it had nothing to do with a personal deficiency. I realized that my problem would not be solved by a boy's affections – nor would it be solved by dieting myself to death. My problem was that I didn't truly love and value myself. I had no self-affirming identity. I had a world full of joy and satisfaction in both my personal and professional life that I had worked very hard to create; yet I refused to acknowledge just how powerful the things that are our own creation can be. I bought into the paradigm that love completes and that coupling is an essential part of the human experience. I began to question long held assumptions and beliefs about my life, and in doing so I became liberated. I became free to appreciate all that I did have, and began to evaluate my life in terms of my own happiness, and not by our society's

cultural norms and standards. My single problem wasn't that I was single; it was that I devalued all the beauty that being single brings.

There is so much to celebrate about the single existence, and it's about time that we take notice: More people are living single than ever before, many delaying marriage for quite some time and some forgoing it all together. Even many of those who do marry will spend at least part of their life not in a romantic relationship, and they ought to realize that those years can be valued and enjoyed. The joys that living a life on your own terms bring – a life that is unconstrained by the whims, desires, or demands of anyone else – can amount to unparalleled happiness. The valuing of your own accomplishments, the education you claim, the career you forge, the community ties you build, the good you do for other people, and the enriching you do for society is a splendor like nothing else. The ties that bind you through friendship and the unparalleled satisfaction you get by having another person understand, value, and love who you are and conversely the feels of belonging that you get from having these same sentiments for others is an extraordinarily beautiful experience.

Once I learned to place value on all of this-- all the good that comes with being single-- I realized that I no longer had a single problem; in fact I had no real problem at all. All those years I hungered for love, both figuratively and literally, I was really just starving for an identity. I was craving someone to validate my existence by loving me. I was looking to find the person I am inside another human being. I was attempting to scapegoat the significance of my own path in life by finding someone else to give it meaning. Before this unyielding, uncomfortable longing could go away, I had to ultimately realize just how significant I am as an individual.

Finally, my identity is rooted in me, and all the good things and good people that make my life worth living. I can grow to love a man romantically and that can be a beautiful thing. If I want to, and if I want it to be. We could get married in Massachusetts, or any other land that will take us as equal and full participating members of society. If I decide that I want to choose that life for myself. Regardless, I'll always have me – a solo, self-respecting,

uninhibited individual. I have a lot of love to give, to many people in many different ways. However, I was born into this world one person, single. I shouldn't feel ashamed for living my life that way. I should feel proud!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Dilts lives in Wichita, KS and is a graduate of Wichita State University, where he earned his Bachelor's Degree in Political Science with a minor in Sociology. He has been the Executive Director of the Sedgwick County Democratic Party since he was 19 years old. He is also the President of the Kansas Democratic Party LGBT Caucus. He is an ardent feminist activist, avid reader and writer, and plans to pursue a Master's Degree in Gender Studies. He loves his life as a single gay man and enjoys spending quality time with his amazing friends.