

Rekindling An Old Flame

Dr. Nancy Kalish, a psychology professor at California State University, Sacramento, is the only researcher of couples who reunited with former sweethearts. Her book, *Lost & Found Lovers: Facts and Fantasies of Rekindled Romances*, 1997, is based on her first four years of research (now 11 years). Questionnaire responses were included from 1001 participants, ages 18 to 89, in all 50 states, and 35 countries. In addition, the book contains the lost love stories of the couples in their own words.

These first participants found their lost lovers without the Internet, which in 1993 was nonexistent as we know it today. Since the publication of her book, she has surveyed, met, emailed, and spoken to more than 2500 lost love participants.

The findings indicated that even before the World Wide Web, it was common for people to reunite with lost loves from their past. Now of course, it is even more common, with web sites such as Reunion.com (Kalish is their Relationship Expert) and people search engines such as at yahoo.com.

This is not a Baby Boomer, or senior citizen, phenomenon. People of all ages rekindle romances, as just another, ordinary way to find love. In fact, half of the participants were under 35.

But people do not reunite with just any lost love from the past; most participants, regardless of their ages, went back to someone they loved when they were 17 or younger. These are the romances that parents usually belittle, calling them puppy loves. But these were the very loves that my participants took most seriously as time went by, the loves they missed the most.

Parents not only belittled these young romances, but many played a large part in ending these romances. When I asked participants why their initial romances broke up, the reason cited by the largest group of respondents was, "Parents Disapproved." Years later, when the couple reunited, they still resented that past parental intrusion. Many parents went to extremes to separate the young couple -- from hiding letters to jailing the young men. Couples who are happily reunited as adults are most regretful if their childbearing days are over and they can never have children together.

Other typical reasons for the initial breakups included "We Were Too Young," "Moved Away," "Left to Join the Military," and "Went Away to College." But only a very few couples checked the box, "We Were Not Getting Along." These were not neurotic, try-and-try-again couples who went back for another round of emotional battering. People don't change very much when it comes to personality, so a reunion with an abuser would be a poor choice. The reasons the romances broke apart years ago were situational, so years later, during the second romance, the original roadblocks were gone.

Journalists often assume that most rekindled couples reconnect at school reunions. This turned out to be a false assumption. Very few couples waited until the year of the school reunion to reconnect. The two most common ways that they reunited were by writing a letter or an email to the lost love, or by placing a telephone call. They had no trouble finding the other person in most cases, so it turns out to be just another myth that people needed to use a detective agency. Only 4 people out of 1001 used a detective. Most people leave a trail when they move: relatives that remained in the old home town, mutual friends who know the current address, or a school alumni association that is willing to forward a letter to the new address. Or now, the Internet.

People don't usually go looking for lost loves unless they are happy and secure within themselves. These are not desperate and lonely individuals who are afraid to form new attachments so instead they take the easy way out and rekindle an old flame. Quite the opposite. People search when they feel good, and that makes sense. Would you go to a school reunion, and let your old friends see you, if you were unemployed or depressed? No, we all want to put our best foot forward, -- especially if we want to win back someone who left us.

Usually it is the person who was initially left by the other, the "dumpee," who does the searching.

Perhaps the most surprising finding of all is that the second time around, these romances are very successful --

providing that both people are single, divorced or widowed. 72 % of the couples reported that they were still together at the time they filled out the questionnaire. And if the partners had been first loves, they were successful 78% of the time. Participants often describe their romances as "comfortable" and "familiar," but these words do not indicate a ho-hum attachment. Most of the couples reported that this lost and found love experience was the most emotional and sexual romance in all of their love history.

They are "soul mates," the couples said, and many believe that a "Higher Power" has brought them back together. Because of this, they believe they will never be separated again. This is not a fantasy. It is a love that was interrupted.

But there is a decidedly detrimental and unexpected consequence to looking for lost loves online: marriages that probably would have survived have crumbled when a lost lover entered the picture. Kalish's 1993-1996 research indicated an extramarital rate among these couples of 30%. Currently, the extramarital rate of the couples who contact Kalish is running at 82%, and most of these people have found each other on the Internet.

These people did not expect the reappearance of a lost lover to carry such a wallop. They thought they could merely catch up on old times, get "closure," or even have lunch with this old friend. Kalish's lost love participants report that they were blind-sided; they did not expect their feelings to return, with a vengeance, from their past. They did not understand the risks to their marriages. Knowing the possibilities in advance will help people make more informed decisions.

Any medium can be misused, and technology should not be blamed for these marital problems, says Kalish. For people who are single, divorced, or widowed, rekindled romances are a fantastic way to find one's soul mate. If someone is married, he or she should not search for a lost love.

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Short note about the author

Nancy Kalish, Ph.D. is a psychology professor at California State Univ. and the author of *Lost & Found Lovers*. She is the international expert on rekindled romances, lost loves, and first love, and has appeared on Oprah, 20/20, NPR, CNN, and Montel, to name a few. Her research has been discussed in *Dear Abby*, *Redbook*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Parade*, and *Men's Health*, among many others. Visit her popular web site at <http://www.lostlovers.com>.

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