

Alternative

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Dear Reader.

This issue of the Newsletter is on the topic of human love. The topic may seem unusual for this publication which usually sticks to the intersection of religion and politics. But human love throughout the centuries has been at the heart of religion, politics, philosophy, and literature, not to mention everyone's life. The topic may seem strange because in modern times the study of love has become almost the exclusive preserve of psychology. Psychology has no doubt illuminated many aspects of love. However, human love usually involves more than a single person. The assumption that the psychologist has the last word on love almost certainly truncates and distorts a full understanding of love.

The topic might seem to pose insuperable problems for anyone to analyze. Anyone who writes about love reveals his or her own life's experiences and their inadequacy to establish the writer as an expert who can give advice. Many if not most people would disdain any attempt at analysis. Words are useless, it is said; what counts is the experience

Admittedly, anyone with a shred of wisdom knows better than to give advice on love or claim to be an expert on the subject. What is possible and potentially of great value is to introduce people to a conversation that the human race has been engaged in for centuries. The young person who is in the thrall of a first passionate sexual love is not likely to listen to any warnings from people who may have had a similar experience. But when the passion slightly dims he or she may be ready for reflection on love.

The closest partner to love is death. The death of a loved person causes grief that can initially seem unbearable and it might remain a burden for weeks and months afterward. The Stoics and Epicureans advised their followers not to love anyone so as not to feel grief. The Stoic Epictetus said that if a man's wife dies, he should say "a woman died"; if he does not feel an attachment to a person he will not feel any grief.

Stoicism dominated the first centuries of the Common Era and profoundly influenced Christianity. And surprisingly, it is the ruling philosophy of our age. It was Stoicism that first developed the idea of a Mother Nature who rules all and the scientific view that humans are insignificant specks in the universe. In that context, to grieve a mere human death is not to understand the universe. After the death of a parent or a marriage partner, the mourner is expected to "get over it" and return to work in a few days where co-workers may not know what to say and therefore they say nothing. One's attitude to death and mourning is probably the best index of one's understanding of love.

FOUR LOVES

By Gabriel Moran

Perhaps no religion gives such a prominent place to love as does Christianity. Jewish religion summed up the law in one of the best known passages in the Bible: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Dt 6:5). Jesus’ addition of a second commandment – “and you should love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39) sums up the law. There has always been a dispute about who my neighbor is. Jewish religion assumes a love for one’s people as the only realistic way to speak of love. Jesus answered the question of who is my neighbor with a parable, the point of which seems to be that the term neighbor refers to any individual whom we see is in need and whom we can help.

A stringent demand of Jesus, one that is ridiculed by many non-Christians, is that his followers should “love your enemies.” (Mt 5:44). Jewish commentators object to Jesus’ claim that “you have heard it was said ‘you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” is not true of Jewish law. But it is simply impossible to love everyone, most obviously someone who hates you. Jewish commentators who are friendly to Christianity point out that the text would be clearer if it were more accurately translated as “love to your enemies.” Jesus is not demanding that his followers have a feeling called love but rather that they should “do good to those who hate you,” a process that might de-hostilize the person who is at present an enemy.

But what does “love of God” mean? The word love is regularly used of both a relation to another human being and also to other living and nonliving objects. Someone who says “I love my new home” or “I love my dog” might be suspected of having a distorted view of love. But who knows? Loving one’s dog might be the best one can manage at a particular time in life. It is preferable at least to those whom Chesterton says think that they love God because they don’t love anyone else. The phrase “love of God” may refer to “God” as subject or as object, that is, it can mean either a love that humans direct to God or else a love that God directs to humans. The Christian perspective is that the love that humans express is a response to the love that God bestows on all creatures.

Christianity introduced here a new idea of love that is expressed by the word *agape*. It is love that is given unselfishly, a love that looks for no rewards or returns. Such a love is attributed to God. Jesus’ followers are encouraged to imitate this benevolence. The word *altruism* was coined in the 19th century for this kind of action that is directed to a good not for oneself but for another. It is a love that is praised but at the same time is dismissed as either a delusion or hidden selfishness. It is a term that should never have been coined.

A selfish act is said to be based on “self-interest”; so the alternative is thought to be selfless activity. But a human act is the act of a self. A self would not act if he or she were not interested, a word that mean “to be between.” The alternative to a selfish act is one that finds what is between us, that is, common interests. This kind of act is not the same as what is called “reciprocal altruism” which really explains (and dismisses)

altruism as a deal between two selfish people. Common interests can sometimes be found between two people but its ultimate basis is community, the sharing of interest in a common humanity.

For analyzing four kinds of love, I turn to a writer whose work includes a sense of common humanity, religious mysticism, and understanding of love. I comment on four passages from the novelist George Eliot.

1. “The effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so bad for you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who have lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Eliot is here describing Dorothy in the novel *Middlemarch*. The word love does not appear in the passage but that is perhaps necessary for the kind of love that Christianity calls *agape*, a love that gives with little awareness of what is achieved and without praise from the public. I suspect that in using the word *diffusive* Eliot was well aware of the saying at the center of medieval ethics: *Omne bonum diffusivum sui est*. “The good is that which is diffusive of itself.” The good overflows itself and affects everyone in its orbit. The good that sustains the world is mainly composed of “unhistoric acts” done by people who lived faithful lives that were hidden and are now forgotten. What do such people accomplish? Eliot, as she often does, uses the double negative that is typical of religious mysticism: “things are not so bad for you and me as they might have been.”

This meaning of the good saves religious mysticism from its inherent danger of a withdrawal from the world and all “attachments” done for the sake of the mystic’s own contentment. The mark of great mystics has paradoxically been their involvement with the politics of their time from Meister Eckhart’s denunciation of the rich in the 14th century Rhineland to Thomas Merton’s leading an anti-war movement in the 1960s. The love gathered in contemplation overflows to others with effects impossible to measure.

2. “A friend is someone to whom you can pour out the contents of your heart, chaff and wheat together, knowing that gentle hands will take and sift it, saving what is worth saving, and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away.”

Eliot is describing here the love of friendship which practically every human being experiences. Aristotle wrote that no one would wish to live without friends. There are many kinds of friendship but Eliot gets to a central element in saying that a friend is someone you can trust with what you might be ashamed of. With a gentle motion a friend makes it possible for you to accept both what you feel is praiseworthy and what you feel is bad about yourself.

3. “I like not only to be loved but to also be told that I am loved. I am not sure you are of the same mind. But the realm of silence is large enough beyond the grave. This is the world of light and speech, and I shall take my leave to tell you that you are very dear.”

Eliot describes in this letter to her friend Georgiana Burne-Jones a love that is exemplified between parent and child or between siblings, close relatives, or special friends. Recently, the words “I love you” have taken on a ridiculously totemic meaning the mere utterance of which signals commitment to a sexual partner. Eliot would protest this narrowing of the phrase’s meaning. She wanted to hear the words. It is true that saying “I love you” to an audience of hundreds of people hollows out any meaning of the words, but the phrase need not be restricted to one person. Eliot recognizes and accepts that the person she speaks to might not share her feelings about “I love you.” But that does not stop her from “taking leave” to tell that person “you are very dear.”

4. “What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined for life, to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, and to be with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of their last parting.”

This passage from Eliot’s *Adam Bede* describes the greatest thing that two human souls can experience. It is what every marriage proclaims has been found. Of course, more than half of those marriages today do not endure “to the moment of the last parting.” That does not stop people from believing that they are “joined for life.” It might be that marriage is not a failed institution so much as the fact that many people marry too early when they have not taken the time to reflect on the realistic chances that the love will continue when the excitement of sexual passion dims as it inevitably must.

Human beings can make a mistake with the first marriage and deserve a second chance. The second time might be done with more insight and can be true and lasting love. But after three or four tries one has to suspect that the person will never learn that “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds/Or bends with the remover to remove. Oh, no! it is an ever-fixed mark/That looks on tempests and is never shaken.” (Shakespeare).

Marriage has dramatically changed in recent times. It was once a contract between families in which a man acquired a woman to produce his children and carry on the family name. The twentieth century changed the meaning of marriage. There was still the need for children, although fewer than in the previous centuries. Women who had the power to do so no longer accepted being a man’s property although they might still look for a mutual love with a man. A sensible proposal in the 1920s advocated two kinds of marriage: the traditional marriage with children and a new phenomenon, the companionate marriage. The legal proposal never went through but the reality was already there.

Even the Roman Catholic Church recognized in 1930 that marriage had acquired another purpose than procreation. By accepting love between the partners as a purpose of marriage the church put itself into an indefensible position because it continued to oppose the human race’s sensible efforts to control births. The evolution of marriage made marriage between homosexual partners a logical result. Although some people see this development as destructive of marriage, the willingness and even strong desire of gay and lesbian people to marry probably strengthens an institution that could use help.

TWO KINDS OF LOVE

By Jonathan Haidt

Romantic love is an extraordinary psychological state that launched the Trojan War, inspired much of the world's best (and worst) music and literature, and gave many of us the most perfect days of our lives. But I think that romantic love is widely misunderstood.

In some corners of universities, the professors tell their students that romantic love is a social construction, invented by the French troubadours of the twelfth century with their stories of chivalry, idealization of women, and the uplifting ache of unconsummated desire. It's certainly true that cultures create their own understandings of psychological phenomena but many of these phenomena will occur regardless of what people think about them. A survey of 166 human cultures found clear evidence of romantic love in 88 percent of them; for the rest, the ethnographic record was too thin to be sure either way.

What the troubadours did give us is a particular myth of "true" love – the idea that real love burns brightly and passionately, and keeps on burning until death, and then after death as the lovers are reunited in heaven. As I see it, the modern myth of true love involves these beliefs. True love is passionate love that never fades; if you are in true love you should marry that person; if love ends, you should leave that person because it was not true love; and if you can find the right person, you will have true love forever. You might not believe this myth yourself, particularly if you are older than thirty, but many young people in Western nations are raised on it, and it acts as an ideal that they unconsciously carry with them even if they scoff at it.

If love is defined as eternal passion it is biologically impossible. To see this and to save the dignity of love, you have to understand the difference between two kinds of love: passionate and companionate. Passionate love is a wildly emotional state in which tender and sexual feelings, elation and pain, anxiety and relief, altruism and jealousy, coexist in a confusion of feelings. Passionate love is the love you fall into. It is what happens when Cupid's arrow hits your heart, and in an instant, the world around you is transformed. You crave union with your beloved

Companionate love, in contrast, is the affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply intertwined. Compassionate love grows slowly over the years as lovers apply their attachments and caregiving systems to each other, and as they begin to rely upon, care for, and trust each other. If the metaphor for passionate love is fire, the metaphor for companionate love is vines growing, intertwining, and gradually binding two people together. The contrast of wild and calm forms of love has occurred to people in many cultures. As a woman in a hunter-gatherer tribe in Namibia put it: "When two people come together their hearts are on fire and their passion is very great. After a while the fire cools and that's how it stays."

Passionate love is a drug. Its symptoms overlap with those of heroin and cocaine. It's no wonder. Passionate love alters the activity of several parts of the brain, including parts that are involved in the release of dopamine. Any experience that feels intensely good

releases dopamine, and the dopamine link is crucial here because drugs that artificially raise dopamine levels, as do heroin and cocaine, put you at the risk of addiction. If you take cocaine once a month you won't become addicted but if you take it every day, you will. No drug can keep you continuously high.

So if passionate love is a drug it has to wear off eventually. Nobody can stay high forever. If passionate love is allowed to run its joyous course, there must come a day when it weakens. One of the lovers usually feels the change first. It's like waking up from a shared dream to see your sleeping partner drooling. In those moments of returning sanity, the lover may see flaws and defects to which she was blind before. The beloved falls off the pedestal, and then, because our minds are so sensitive to changes, her change in feeling can take an exaggerated importance. "Oh my God," she thinks, "the magic has worn off – I'm not in love with him anymore." If she subscribes to the myth of true love, she might even consider breaking up with him. After all, if the magic ended, it can't be true love. But if she does end the relationship, she might be making a mistake.

Passionate love does not turn into companionate love. Passionate love and companionate love are two separate processes, and they have different time lines. Their diverging paths produce two danger points, two places where many people make grave mistakes. Passionate love ignites, it burns, and it can reach its maximum temperature within days. During its weeks or months of madness, lovers can't help but think of marriage, and they often talk about it, too. This is often a mistake. Nobody can think straight when high on passionate love. People are not allowed to sign contracts when they are drunk, and I sometimes wish we could prevent people from proposing marriage when they are high on passionate love because once a marriage proposal is accepted, families are notified, and a date is set; it's very hard to stop the train. The drug might wear off during the stressful wedding planning phase, and many of these couples will walk down the aisle with doubt in their hearts and divorce in their futures.

The other danger point is the day the drug weakens its grip. Passionate love doesn't end on that day, but the crazy and obsessional high period does. Breakups often happen at this point, and for many couples that's a good thing. Cupid is usually portrayed as an impish fellow because he's so fond of joining together the most inappropriate couples. But sometimes breaking up is premature, because if the lovers had stuck it out, if they had given companionate love a chance to grow, they might have found true love.

True love exists, I believe, but it is not – cannot – be passion that lasts forever. True love, the love that undergirds strong marriages, is simply strong companionate love, with some added passion, between two people who are firmly committed to each other. Companionate love may look weak because it can never attain the intensity of passionate love. But if the time scale is changed from six to sixty years, it is passionate love that looks trivial – a flash in the pan – while companionate love can last a lifetime. When we admire a couple still in love on their fiftieth anniversary, it is this blend of loves – mostly companionate – that we are admiring.

LOVE OF EACH, LOVE OF ALL

By David Steindl-Rast

(Editor's note: David Steindl-Rast is a 92 year old Benedictine brother who has written on spirituality in relation to science, mysticism and political action since the 1950s).

When someone asks me about my personal relationship with God my spontaneous reply is a question: What do you mean by God? For decades I have spoken with people all over the world and I have learned that the word "God" must be used with utmost caution if we want to avoid misunderstandings. I also find far-reaching agreement among human beings when we reach that mystical core from which all religious traditions spring. The term "God" must be anchored in that mystical awareness in which all humans agree before they start talking about it.

In my best, most alive moments – in my mystical moments – I have a profound sense of belonging. At those moments I am aware of being truly at home in the universe. There is no longer any doubt in my mind that I belong to this Earth Household, in which each member belongs to all others – bugs too beavers, black-eyed Susans to black holes, quarks to quails, lightning to fireflies, humans to hyenas. To say yes to this limitless mutual belonging is love. When I speak of God, I mean this kind of love, this great yes to belonging. I experience this love at one and the same time as God's Yes to all that exists. In saying yes, I realize God's very life and love within me.

But there is more to this yes of love than a sense of belonging. There is also a deep longing. Who has not experienced in love both the longing and belonging? Paradoxically, these two heighten each other's intensity. The more intimately we belong, the more we long to belong more fully. Longing adds a dynamic aspect to our yes of love. Nothing is static; everything is in motion with a dynamism that is, moreover, deeply personal.

When love is genuine, belonging is always mutual. The beloved belongs to the lover, as the lover belongs to the beloved. I belong to the universe and to the divine. Yes, that is its source and this belonging is also mutual. That is why I can say "my God" – not in a possessive sense, but in the sense of a loving relatedness. If my deepest belonging is mutual, could my most fervent longing be mutual, too? It must be so. Staggering though it is, what I experience as my longing for God is God's longing for me. One cannot have a personal relationship with an impersonal force. True, I must not project on God the limitations of a person; yet, the Divine Source must have all the perfections of personhood. Where else would I have gotten them? It makes sense, then, to speak of a personal relationship with God. We are aware of this – dimly at least – in moments in which we are most wakeful, most alive, most truly human.

The Bible expresses these insights in the words "God speaks," which is one way of pointing toward my personal relationship with the Divine Source. This relationship can be understood as a dialogue. God speaks and I am able to answer. But how does God speak? Through everything there is. Everything, every person, every situation, is ultimately Word. The Word tells me something and challenges me to respond. Each moment with all it contains spells out the great yes in a new and unique way. By making

my response moment to moment, word by word, I am becoming the Word that God speaks in me and to me and through me.

When and to what do our senses respond most readily? If I ask myself this question, I think immediately of working in my small garden. For fragrance, I grow jasmine, pineapple mint, sage, thyme, and eight kinds of lavender. What an abundance of delightful smells in so small a patch of ground. And what a variety of sounds: spring rain, autumn wind, year-round birds – mourning dove, blue jay and wren, the hawk’s sharp cry at noon and the owl’s hooting at nightfall – the sound the broom makes on gravel, wind chimes, and the creaking garden gate. Who could translate the taste of strawberry or fig into words? What an infinite array of things to touch, from the wet grass under my bare feet in the morning to the sun warmed boulders against which I lean when the evening turns cool.

Yes, I admit it. To have a place of solitude like this is an inestimable gift. It lets the heart expand, lets the senses wake up, one by one, to come alive with fresh vitality. Whatever our circumstances, we need somehow to set aside a time and a place for this kind of solitude. It is a necessity for everyone’s life, not a luxury. What comes alive in those moments is more than eyes or ears; our hearts listen and respond. Until I attune my senses, my heart remains dull, sleepy, half dead. In the measure in which my heart wakes up, I feel the challenge to my responsibility.

We tend to forget the close relationship between responsiveness and responsibility, between sensuousness and social challenge. Outside and inside are of one piece. As we learn to really look with our eyes, we begin to look with our hearts also. We begin to face what we may prefer to overlook, begin to see what is going on in this world of ours. As we begin to listen with our ears, our hearts begin to hear the cry of the oppressed. To be in touch with one’s body is to be in touch with the world – all areas with which our dull hearts are conveniently out of touch.

In my travels I notice how easy it is to lose attentiveness. Over-saturation of our senses tends to dim our alertness. A deluge of sense impressions tends to distract the heart from single-minded attention. But the hermit in each of us does not run away from the world; it seeks that stillpoint within, where the heartbeat of the world can be heard. All of us – each in a different measure – need solitude because we need to cultivate mindfulness.

How shall we do this in practice? There are many methods. The one I have chosen is gratefulness, which can be practiced, cultivated, learned. As we grow in gratefulness we grow in mindfulness. Before I open my eyes in the morning, I remind myself that I have eyes to see while millions of my brothers and sisters are blind – most because of conditions that could be improved if our human family would come to its senses and spend its resources reasonably, equitably. If I open my eyes with this thought, chances are that I will be more grateful for the gift of sight and more alert to the needs of those who lack that gift. There is no closer bond than the one that gratefulness celebrates, the bond between giver and thanksgiver. Everything is gift. Grateful living is a celebration of the universal give and take of life, a limitless yes to belonging.