

Kinds of Love

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Some years ago an anthropologist studying Native American rituals visited a Navaho reservation in New Mexico. The tribe had given him permission to observe their ceremonies and record their songs.

As he neared the end of his visit, he spoke with the *Hatalii*, or medicine man, about what he'd seen and heard.

"It seems that all your songs are about water. Is that all you sing about?" he asked.

"Not all our songs," the medicine man replied, "but water is quite important to us because there is so little of it and we need it to survive. So, yes, many of our songs are about water."

He continued, "I notice on the radio that most of your popular songs are about love. Is that because you have so little of it?"

I think he's got a point there. So many of our songs are about love. Looking for love, wishing for love, losing love, the incredible joy of finding love. Sounds a bit like water, doesn't it? I mean, in a desert we might sing about looking for water, wishing for water, running out of water, the incredible joy of finding water. Do we sing about love because we have so little of it?

Consider the song, "Almost Like Being in Love," by Lerner & Leowe: "What a day this has been, what a rare mood I'm in. Why it's almost like being in love. I've got a smile on my face for the whole human race. It's almost like being in love. All the music of life seems to be like a bell that is ringing for me. And from the way that I feel when that bell starts to peal, I could swear I was falling, I would swear I was falling, it's almost like being in love."

I think this represents a slice of what romantic love means in our culture. This is the love of exuberance, of happiness, of delight. This is the love we celebrate on Valentine's Day. After all, who wouldn't want to be so full of delight

with your partner that you've got a smile on your face for the whole human race? And it's been said that loving deeply in one direction makes us more loving in all other directions as well. Who wouldn't want that kind of feeling? The problem, though, is that it is a feeling – and feelings always change.

And then we've got that other kind of love song, the kind epitomized by the Righteous Brothers' song that goes, "You've lost that lovin' feeling, whoa that lovin' feeling. You've lost that lovin' feeling and it's gone, gone, gone, who-ah-o."

We fall just as low on the loss of love as we fly high on its discovery. It's amazing that more hasn't been made of just how crazy this is. We call it "human nature," but it's really the nature of our cultural definition of love as a feeling: a wonderful or terrible feeling. Either we're flying high or we're in despair. What does that sound like? How about bipolar disorder?

Of course we have problems with love if we define love as a feeling. Feelings always change! Sooner or later in every long-term relationship, you're going to feel every possible emotion toward your partner and love's just one of them.

As I was thinking about these things I remembered a song I learned in Lutheran Sunday School many years ago. At first I thought it just a quaint memory but then I realized just how much to the point it was. I'd like to share it with you. Maybe you'd like to sing it with me. It even has hand movements.

"The foolish ones built their house upon the sand.
The foolish ones built their house upon the sand.
The foolish ones built their house upon the sand.
And the rains came tumbling down.

The rains came down and the floods came up.
The rains came down and the floods came up.
The rains came down and the floods came up.
And the house on the sand fell down.

The wise ones built their house upon the rock.
The wise ones built their house upon the rock.

The wise ones built their house upon the rock.
And the rains came tumbling down.

The rains came down and the floods came up.
The rains came down and the floods came up.
The rains came down and the floods came up.
And the house on the rock stood firm.

Now I'm not exactly sure I remember what the teacher said the sand and rocks were supposed to mean. I was in kindergarten after all! I wasn't paying that close attention. But this week it came to me that it could be about different ways of understanding love.

Because as long as we think of love primarily as a feeling, and we base our hopes and dreams on having that feeling, we're headed for trouble. Feelings always change! As Ann Morrow Lindbergh wrote, "When you love someone, you do not love them all the time, in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is an impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity – in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern."

And yet how many relationships fall under the shadow of falsity as one or both partners begin to feel guilty that their feelings have changed. Then the charade begins as they try to behave as though they felt differently than they do. We can become so dedicated to the belief that we should feel certain things that we can sometimes convince ourselves that we always feel the same. But feelings always change! And when we commit to embodying a certain kind of loving feeling that commitment can, tragically, block our ability to feel it again as a spontaneous, authentic emotion. True feelings require authenticity of character

and authenticity is exactly what we lose when we commit to embodying emotions we don't actually feel.

So what can we do? Whatever it is, it will be countercultural because our culture's definition of love as a feeling is so incredibly dysfunctional. Our understanding of love is as primitive and ill informed as an infant's understanding of adulthood. But in the course of time, we expect that the infant will grow and change and learn what it means to be an adult. Our culture has shown very little inclination toward growing into a fuller understanding of love.

I think Erich Fromm was on to something when he wrote *The Art of Loving*, saying, "Love isn't something natural. Rather it requires discipline, concentration, patience, faith, and the overcoming of narcissism. It isn't a feeling, it is a practice."

And when Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said that "We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation – the foundation of such a method is love," he clearly was not talking about a feeling. He was talking about a practice, a discipline, an overcoming of self-centeredness.

If love isn't simple it must be complex. So it might help to take a look some of its various parts. The Greeks, who seem to have thought about just about everything first, identified four different categories, or kinds of love.

The first is called *agape*, which refers to an unconditional love that sees beyond the outer surface and accepts the recipient for whom he or she is, regardless of their flaws, shortcomings, or faults. It's the type of love that everyone strives to have for their fellow human beings. Although you may not like someone, you decide to love them just as a human being. This kind of love is all about sacrifice as well as giving and expecting nothing in return. *Agape* is a verb: it is the love demonstrated by your behavior toward another person. It is a committed and chosen love. This is the kind of love the early Christians believed that God had for them and which they shared with each another.

The second kind of love is called *phileo*, which is a dispassionate virtuous love. It makes you desire friendship with someone. Although you may have an *agape* love for your enemies, you may not have a *phileo* love for the same people. *Phileo* is a noun: it is how you feel about someone.

The third kind of love is called *storge*, and refers to what might be called “natural” affection, like the love felt by parents for their children, or the love that members of a family feel for each other. *Storge* love is unconditional, accepts flaws or faults and ultimately drives you to forgive.

And the fourth Greek term is already well-known to us: *eros*. *Eros* is passionate love, with sensual desire and longing. It is romantic, pure emotion without the balance of reason. It is the kind of love that often triggers “high” feelings in a new relationship and makes you say, “I love him or her.”

Although far from the last word on the subject, the Greek words for love help us to recognize that some of our confusion about love derives from having only one word for what is actually more than one thing. For example, we can clearly see that it is possible to love our enemies (*agape*) without liking them at all (*phileo*).

Another thing we can see from this is that it makes a difference whether love is a verb or a noun, whether love is something we feel or something we do. This is important because, as I’ve said, feelings always change. *Storge*, *phileo*, *eros*, all nouns, come and go depending on the behavior of others and our own inner response to our experience in the moment. Only *agape*, the verb, is a product of our will, a kind of love we can choose to do no matter how we happen to feel in the moment.

I’d like to introduce another way of looking at love. I’ve said that the basic move of spirituality is the relaxation of our boundaries of self to include something that was not previously a part of us. From this perspective, love is an inherently spiritual act. We let down our guard, our boundaries, that separate us from someone else and we let them in, we include them in our circle of self. Now there can be many reasons for doing this, and that may give rise to some of the various Greek terms. We may let them in because they are our children (*storge*), because they are our friends (*phileo*), or because they are our lovers (*eros*). But all these feelings can change and we might feel compelled to expel them out of our circle of selfhood. But if we open our circle of selfhood as a deliberate act of will (*agape*), we enter into a profoundly different kind of love, a spiritual love, a love that includes but does not exclude.

When you think about it though, isn't *agape* love, the basic move of relaxing our boundaries of selfhood to include something new, in a way, isn't that the most basic fact of our conscious existence? What if spiritual, *agape* love turned out to be our true nature, the most basic fact of our lives?

I invite you to consider this with me. When we open our eyes, we receive a vision of the world that comes to us from outside ourselves, and we include our sight within our circle of selfhood. And the same is true of all our senses: touch, taste, smell, and hearing all carry the outside world into our circle of selfhood. From this perspective, spirituality is the most basic fact of our lives.

Even breathing and eating become spiritual acts from this perspective because we are bringing new things into our bodies, our lives, our selves. Looking at it this way, I can't find anything that's not spiritual.

What spiritual teachings show us is that we go astray from our true nature when we choose to let our emotions determine our reality for good or for ill. We pursue good feelings and try to avoid bad ones. We cultivate the parts of ourselves that we like and try to suppress others of which we disapprove. And in our attempt to feel good about our experiences and ourselves, we commit ourselves to a partial version of ourselves just as surely as when we commit ourselves to feeling certain emotions when they are not present. We become inauthentic, blocked from our fulfillment by the rejection of our inner wholeness.

This is the spiritual truth of the ages. *Agape* is the love that sees all, endures all, accepts all. Developing this kind of love doesn't make us defenseless against the hardships of life; it is what can give us the strength and compassion to triumph instead of struggle, to flourish instead of merely surviving.

So when you're looking for a love upon which we can base our lives, nurture our intimate relationships, and inform an unflinchingly joyous connection to the world, I invite you to consider *agape*, the spiritual choice, the most basic fact of life, the true wholeness of our authentic selfhood, as the rock upon which to build your house. Because the house on that rock stands firm.

May it be so.