

What is Love?

Rumi says, "You will be forgiven for forgetting that what you really desire is loves unending joy."

When I was an 18 year old newly wed, I was filled with youthful idealism. My life's goal was to be the most loving wife and mother the world had ever seen. I was dedicated to doing it differently to my parents, who I was convinced did not love me and did not love each other. In my quest of devoting my life to understanding what love is, I diligently cut out the "Love is..." Precious Moments comic strips to paste into my journal and looked for quotes about love.

The next year when I was expecting my first baby I lay in the sun at the public swimming pool reading "Love Story," by Eric Segal crying my eyes out at true love cut tragically short by death. I went on to read Heloise and Abelard, Tristan and Isolde and Romeo and Juliet and wept copiously as I watched Dr. Zivago over and over again. I read about the mystics ecstatic love of God. Love seemed so unattainable, so elusive. I had emerged from the 60's with ideas about freedom, love and a new world order. I suppose I could be embarrassed by my childish naivete and arrogant confidence - but I feel kindly towards myself because my intention remained pure and my commitment intact through all the failures and disappointments in being loved or coming to know what loving another really means, that the ensuing years brought. Now more than 30 years later, I have given up trying to define what love is. Instead I notice in myself everything that I can identify as "not love," and discard it as soon as I see what a tawdry imitation or fake presentation it is.

As I've discovered what I thought of as precious jewels and solid gold was but gold plate and glass, I have asked myself the question "where could the notion of love have even arisen?" The answer comes back, "It arose deep inside of you." The burning desire, the intention, the idea, the longing all arose in me - and even as I knew what it was, I also did not. It would seem that I have a dual nature. A deep knowing and desire to be what I believe myself to really be and then a more superficial me that did the exact opposite of what I wanted deep down, and I did not even realize it.

I started seeing that what I thought was being loving turned out to be not loving, but needing love - and so spoke to profound lack within myself of knowing myself to "be love." I had dressed myself in garments of such finery that I even fooled myself. I thought I was so giving and it turned out that in giving I was expecting to receive - gratitude, affirmation, praise and attention and my giving was really my need rooted in the fear that I was not good enough. I thought I was such a good listener, but it turned out that I was really rehearsing my own point of view as I listened, so as to negate the other and nurse and soothe the fear that I am really stupid, with my clever arguments. I rationalized disciplining my children as being in their best interests, but it turns out I was just afraid they might reflect poorly on me and destabilize my shaky self image of myself as good and worthy. I did good deeds and then felt a smug self satisfaction instead of the usual nagging sense of inferiority. I pretended to make love when really I was not willing to connect in any real or deep way because of a thousand resentments and judgments of the other. I allowed others to treat me with disrespect and abuse, while I self righteously believed I was holy and Christlike. Instead I was too frightened to speak up for fear that the very person abusing me, might not like me. My holiness was unholy victimhood. My social action

initiatives to fight injustice came from an overidentification with victims, instead of true compassion for the other. I found out that I had fears and beliefs, going all the way back to childhood that I was unlovable, stupid, ugly, unworthy, inferior, unlikable, incompetent in a thousand different ways. All my “love” and “goodness” was an attempt to cover up what I thought about myself. The convolutions of my own mind obscured the natural loving beingness of my true nature. I could neither demand respect nor give respect and although I fooled others as well as I had fooled myself, deep down I knew a different truth that I could only begin to glimpse as I started to shed the garments of self deceit, put on to cover up what I believed myself to be - shameful, unworthy, unlovable.

Gradually through growing awareness of my motives, through careful examination of the experiences of my life that lead me to believe that I was less than what I was and discarding those beliefs, a light of revelation began to dimly shine. This growing awareness started when someone reflected back to me through their eyes, a person I did not know. I started knowing who I truly was when I was seen - all the way down to the core and loved for who I really was. I began to recognize that at the very core of my being was a knowing of Love and Truth, that had never been touched by belief or fear, need and cover-up. It was unsullied by my life and this light was in me, and I was also in it. I started understanding a different, more expansive paradigm. If I was a light bulb then all that separated me from the bright light of Universal Energy was a light-shade. Somehow, my child mind could understand that. I had been so focused on the shade with all its pretty decorations and patterns, that I had completely lost sight of the light and also had misunderstood the purpose of the lampshade. The purpose and meaning of life is to discover this light in oneself and the other. The purpose of life is Love.

Finally I understood that to attempt to “find” love or “define” love is to miss love altogether. Love cannot be defined, it cannot be limited to a representation, a symbol, to language. It is not a feeling. It is not a need. To attempt to understand it is to immediately limit and reduce it. It cannot be done. It is our nature, it is our very being. To create more words and more ideas and more definitions is to create more layers on the lampshade. Or it is like trying to put the ocean into a bathtub. Love is. All we need to do is remove our attention from all that is in the way and let go of our attachment to ideas and definitions. Love that shines through a lampshade of ideas, beliefs, feelings, needs - through the ego, is a dim light indeed.

The purpose of first learning **what is not** is so that we can become aware of **what is**. Understanding this purpose, I can even love and accept the shadow created by the shade. but never give it power over me again, either in myself or others. Now I am beginning to see that I can give, I can listen, I can engage in social justice initiatives, fight for justice, insist on respect, make love, but with a new found freedom, with less thought and more heart and spontaneity, and with less fear and greater compassion. However, I remain vigilant - I know how easy it is to fool myself.

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“Love is the revelation of our deepest personal meaning, value and identity. But this revelation remains impossible as long as we are the prisoners of our own egoism. I cannot find myself in myself, but only in another. My true meaning and worth are shown to me not in my estimate of myself, but in the eyes of the one who loves me; and that one must love me as I am, with my

faults and limitations, revealing to me the truth that these faults and limitations cannot destroy my worth in the eyes of the one who loves me; and that I am therefore valuable as a person, in spite of my shortcomings, in spite of the imperfections of my exterior “package.” The package is totally unimportant. What matters is this infinitely precious message which I can discover only in my love for another person. And this message, this secret, is not fully revealed to me unless at the same time I am able to see and understand the mysterious and unique worth of the one I love.”

Thomas Merton

The Prophet Speaks of Love

Then said Almitra, Speak to us of Love.

And he raised his head and looked upon the people, and there fell a stillness upon them.

And with a great voice he said:

When love beckons to you, follow him,

Though his ways are hard and steep.

And when his wings enfold you, yield to him,

Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.

And when he speaks to you, believe in him,

Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you, so shall he crucify you.

Even as he is for your growth, so is he for your pruning.

Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,

So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.

He threshes you to make you naked.

He sifts you to free you from your husks.

He grinds you to whiteness.

He kneads you until you are pliant;

And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for

God's sacred feast.

**All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart,
and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.**

**But if in your fear you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure,
Then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's
threshing-floor,
Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and
weep, but not all of your tears.**

**Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself.
Love possesses not nor would it be possessed;
For love is sufficient unto love.**

**When you love you should not say "God is in my heart," but rather, "I am in the
heart of God."
And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy,
directs your course.**

**Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself.
But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:
To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night.
To know the pain of too much tenderness.
To be wounded by your own understanding of love;
And to bleed willingly and joyfully.
To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving;
To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy;
To return home at eventide with gratitude;
And then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise
upon your lips.**

Kahlil Gibran