

Love Is the Spirit of This Place
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We fall in love for all kinds of reasons and who-knows-why. A recent article I read said that we fall in love based on smell, magically finding the person whose smell tells us that their immune system complements our own, so our offspring can have the best immune system imaginable. Darwin, whose 200th birthday we celebrated this week, would probably say, along with other evolutionary biologists, that we pick the person who communicates fertility (in the case of female partners) or protection and provision (in the case of male partners) ... and so the curvaceous, rosy-cheeked cheerleader marries the football star and the species lives on. Harville Hendrix and his wife, Helen Hunt, argue in the relationship classic "Getting the Love You Want" that we marry the person "who has the predominant character traits of the people who raised us," and in that way work out any childhood hurts that remain. Socrates apparently thought we sought the person we were split from at the dawn of time, the soul mate who quite literally completed us.

Ah, the magic of love. Cupid draws back his bow, and who really knows why or to what ends?

What we do know is that no matter whom we are drawn to in relationships, who is born into our lives or adopted or taken into the embrace of our families, who enters through the doors of this church or sets themselves up in the cubicle next to ours, that we are from that moment onward in the business of navigating our way into caring relationship with them. We know too that these relationships – the chosen ones or the ones foisted upon us by fate or chance – will have places of ease and good fit and places where the rub is painful and the edges mismatched and ragged. And we want to make our way through it all with as much kindness and goodwill as we can muster.

We want those qualities to our relationships for many reasons. Some of us because we have a commitment to the worth and dignity of all people, and to justice, equity and compassion in relationships, and we want that commitment to have legs. Perhaps others of us want to be loving because we believe that each moment is a mini-eternity – not a length of time, but depth in time – in which we are asked to treat well the person given into our care. Perhaps we believe in the law of cause and effect in the moral world, that what we do makes us who we are, or that goodness and love casts back the same, as the Buddha also taught his monks and nuns. It is a great and noble objective to want to be loving, but hard sometimes to know how to do so in all the relationships we are given to tend.

So how do we learn to embody our ideal? I know in my high school we had a few rounds of sex education in which I learned lots about our bodies and how they fit together best, but where were the chapters that offered the knowledge and skills for the other kind of love-making?

I think most of us have had to seek the clues wherever we could find them. So if you are like me, you have watched carefully the couples whose relationships seemed good and like ones we've wanted to emulate, and just as closely we watched and tried to understand the dynamics of couples whose relationships we never wanted to re-create in our own. We've watched Dr. Phil until we couldn't stand it anymore. We've probably read a few of the experts: "Men Are from Mars," "The Road Less Traveled," "The Rules"! At weddings I perform, couples often come up and tell me how long they have been together, and I almost never miss the opportunity to ask them what they think the secret of their success has been. I've been told the secret to a happy and long relationship is everything from the law of kindness to date night. *And* when the winds blow rough between two people or within one of them, I'm a big fan of going to a therapist you trust before things reach hurricane levels and tear the precious landscape apart.

Let us be clear: I am by no means an expert on this subject. I have been blown off the Aloha Deck of the Love Boat more times than I care to admit; fallen off the Love Wagon. However, this being Valentine's Day Sunday, I thought I might share a few things I have picked up over the years that I think are important. So, for what it is worth ... as my Valentine's Day gift to you I offer three tips – these are ones for weathering the harder periods, the times of stress and disagreement, weathering them with love preserved and maybe even strengthened.

The first I have come to see is that none of us can be blamed for what we feel, nor should we be. Anger, hurt, frustration, disgust, disappointment – they are ours to own and honor. What we can be held responsible for, however, is what we do with and in response to our feelings.

"Know thyself," said Socrates. And in this case, knowing thyself means knowing how you tend to behave under what stressors. Next is knowing enough to know how to protect yourself and others from destructive reactions born out of those states. So, for instance, if you tend to yell when you are tired, then you guard your rest for all that it is worth, and when you come up short of rest some mornings, you pledge to watch yourself all day for the signs of storm clouds rolling in at the horizon. You do whatever it takes to buy yourself time and space to recover your center when you are set off balance. Take a voluntary time out and breathe. Use a lifeline and call a friend. Write horribly, awfully mean things in your diary and then put it in your drawer. Wait as long as you need to until you can act in ways that reflect your better self and not your worst.

I learned this lesson early (and often). The first time was as a small child just able to write. I got angry at my parents for something I've long since forgotten and stormed into my room to fume about it. Out of my anger, I wrote and posted a note on my door, one I knew they would find when they came to apologize to me, and then they would know how I felt and what I thought about them. The note said something like, "You two are mean, ugly baby killers." That note, I believe, is still among "my papers."

Now, let's be clear: My parents have been many things in their lives, but I am pretty sure they were never baby killers. They weren't ugly or particularly mean, either. However, that note was my attempt to hit them where I hoped it might hurt. It just so happens that when they saw the note, they laughed, but I suppose over time and with practice, I might someday have been able to write a note that was well-crafted enough to hit its mark, right between the ribs, right

where it would hurt. And to post that on my door would be unfortunate. Even then, after I calmed down, I knew that the note I wrote already spoke more of my ugliness and meanness than of theirs.

So as an adult, I try not to stick those notes on the doors of life before they dry. I do all the things I know many of you do – write the letter and stick it in the desk drawer for a week before I send it; put e-mails in the “Mail Waiting to Be Sent” (or “Deleted”!) box for a few days; and let a comment pass over until I have had time to *script* my response. The only times I regret my actions are when I violate this rule, never once when I have lived by it.

So that’s the first rule: **Know thyself and give thyself time to respond, not react.**

This, then, brings me to my second point, the second rule of being a lover, not a fighter, which is finding a way to speak your truth, when it is time to speak it, constructively. In two weeks, our “Moving Toward Peace” group is sponsoring a workshop that is designed to help with this. They are offering a day-long training in something called “Non-Violent Communication,” and I have been busily reading one of the seminal books on the theory and thoroughly enjoying it. The book talks about all the ways we subtly do violence to one another in the way we talk, and particularly the ways we navigate difficulty.

If those who are at the workshop like what it has to teach and think it will strengthen our communication around here, I can see making the workshop a requirement for all members – a kind of relational Esperanto of our community. Meanwhile, I’m finding the approach a bit like learning a new language, with unfamiliar grammar that makes my communication more awkward at first, but which promises a whole new range of expression once I’ve mastered it. Along the way, however, I already have a whole new awareness of the ways in which we often muddy the communication among ourselves – masking judgment as observation, blaming others for the way we feel, and being reticent to name what we need.

In the meantime, some of what I am reading mirrors a structure that a couples counselor taught me long ago about how to ask couples to consider communication when things got tough. For years I have asked couples to consider breaking up their concerns and arguments into statements communicating what they each *think* about a situation, what they *feel* about it and what they *want* out of it. So, for instance, you might say, “I think the house is messy again. I feel anxious and frustrated coming home to a messy house. I want us to talk about how we can keep it cleaner,” instead of saying, “Hey, Ms. Messy, meet Mr. Vacuum” (or something worse!).

The structure is stiff and it does get easier, but it is also designed to slow things down a bit. It forces us to think in “I” language and decide what we *think* about a situation, how we *feel* when presented with it, and what we *want* the other person to do with this information. Done well, it can feel invitational, not off-putting. So, for instance, instead of hearing, “You don’t love me. You never spend any time with me anymore,” you would hear, “I think we haven’t spent more than an evening together all week, for the third week in a row. I feel estranged from you and sad that our lives are so separate. I want us to commit to spending time together and figure out how we can do that because I love you and so I want to be with you.”

Who could resist that plea, full of love and honesty and an obvious desire to get closer? Rabbi Edwin Friedman, in a book on family systems, once said (in a quote I think of often) that criticism is an invitation to come closer. Criticism is an invitation to come closer. Yet it so rarely feels that way! Putting our hurt feelings, frustrations or angers in language that gets away from criticizing and closer to naming what we are experiencing and hoping for makes the invitation to come closer easier to hear and understand and respond to.

“I think there some hurt feelings left over from our argument last night. I feel confused about how to deal with that. I want us to get through this and resolve our disagreements.” Sweet nothings whispered in French are lovely, but I’d argue that this is the true language of love: *I think. I feel. I want.*

So that’s the second rule or guideline: **Use that language of thinking, feeling and wanting to broach the divide between you.**

My third and final suggestion for lovers is about reminding each other of the ground we stand upon, even and especially when we disagree.

When someone is angry with us, or even just indifferent for a while, a natural place we go is to feel in danger or threatened. Rational or irrational, the truth is that in that moment, we fear that this argument or this time of indifference might be the beginning of end of the relationship. And the more mad or distant the person becomes, the more acute that fear becomes. A good, healing conversation, however, is hard to sow in ground laced with fear.

Knowing that, here’s what I suggest that we do when we approach difficult conversations. I suggest we set the stage. I suggest we take a moment at the beginning of the conversation, or whenever we see where it is going, to remind ourselves and others of the foundation that particular relationship stands on. I suggest we say something like, “I want to talk with you about something difficult. I am upset, as you probably can tell, and as we speak, I fear you’ll hear more of that in my voice and tone, so before I begin, I want you to know...” and then we tell them what they and this relationship mean to us. To our dearest loved ones, we say how much we adore them, how they are the most important people in the world to us, how this conversation comes out of a place that values that connection, which is why we want to work through this, even if the conversation is hard. The same introduction with slight modifications is also appropriate for neighbors or co-workers or fellow congregation members. Instead of speaking of our adoration, however, we might speak of the respect, friendship, deep regard that we have come to value in those relationships.

This prelude to the conversation does two things in my experience: It reminds *us* of that foundation, and helps keep us anchored there; *and* it reminds the person we are talking to that behind that anger is something they otherwise might miss, namely a deep regard, maybe even undying love. It is easier to hear what follows, to not want to run or fight back, but to listen, when you are reminded that you stand on holy ground of sorts, where the foundation is deep regard and the goal is healing, not hurt.

So the third rule is: **Name the foundation of deep regard that you stand on even as you prepare to cross difficult terrain.** Those are the three.

There is, of course, more to fostering good relationships than just these three rules to getting through the hard conversations. Laughter is supposed to be good for love. Not parting ways or going to bed angry, I am told, helps. Being able to say you are sorry and mean it is vital. Appreciating the other's gifts out loud adds to the positive regard column, which apparently needs to be somewhere between five and seven times higher than the negative input column for a relationship to endure through time. Chocolate and flowers actually do help – the latter, fresh flowers, is known to increase happiness, and the former to produce in the body feelings that imitate those we have when we are falling in love. So the Valentine's Day gifts have their logic.

And, of course, one of the keys to loving well is like the way to Carnegie Hall, the simple power of practice, practice, practice. We practice with all our hearts. May we make beautiful music together the better we get.

Happy Valentine's Day. May love be the spirit of all the places we inhabit.

Amen.