

VALUING LOVE

Note: This essay was written in answer to the question, “How do I bring love into my life?” Published in “Handbook For The Heart,” edited by Richard Carlson and Benjamin Shield, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1996.]

I do not know if there has ever been a time in history when the word love has been used so promiscuously as it is at present.

We are told constantly that we must “love” everyone. Leaders of movements declare that they “love” followers they have never met. Enthusiasts of personal-growth workshops and encounter-group weekends emerge from such experiences announcing that they “love” all people everywhere.

Just as a currency, in the process of becoming more and more inflated, has less and less purchasing power, so words, through an analogous process of inflation, through being used less and less discriminately, are progressively emptied of meaning.

It is possible to feel benevolence and goodwill toward human beings one does not know or does not know very well. It is not possible to feel love. Aristotle made this observation twenty-five hundred years ago, and we still need to remember it. In forgetting it, all we accomplish is the destruction of the concept of love.

Love by its very nature entails a process of selection, of discrimination. Love is our response to what represents our highest values. Love is a response to distinctive characteristics possessed by some beings but not by all. Otherwise, what would be the tribute of love?

If love between adults does not imply admiration, if it does not imply an appreciation of traits and qualities that the recipient of love possesses, what meaning or significance would love have and why would anyone consider it desirable?

In his book “The Art of Loving,” Erich Fromm wrote: “In essence, all human beings are identical. We are all part of One; we are One. This being so, it should not make any difference whom we love.”

Really? If we were to ask our lovers why they care for us, consider what our reaction would be if told, “Why shouldn’t I love you? All human beings are identical. Therefore, it doesn’t make any difference whom I love. So it might as well be you.” Not very inspiring, is it?

So I find the advocacy of “universal love” puzzling—if one takes words literally. Not everyone condemns sexual promiscuity, but I have never heard of anyone who hails it as an outstanding virtue. But spiritual promiscuity? Is that an outstanding virtue? Why? Is the spirit so much less important than the body?

In commenting on this paradox, Ayn Rand wrote in “Atlas Shrugged”: “A morality that professes the belief that the values of the spirit are more precious than matter, a morality that teaches you to scorn a whore who gives her body indiscriminately to all men—the same morality demands that you surrender your soul in promiscuous love for all comers.”

My own impression is that people who talk of “loving” everyone are, in fact, expressing a wish or a plea that everyone love them. But to take love—above all, love between adults—seriously, to treat the concept with respect and distinguish it from generalized benevolence or goodwill, is to

appreciate that it is a unique experience possible between some people but not between all.

Consider the case of romantic love. When two adults with significant spiritual and psychological affinities encounter each other, and if they have evolved to a decent level of maturity—if they are beyond the level of merely struggling to make their relationship “work”—then romantic love can become a pathway, not only to sexual and emotional happiness but also to higher reaches of human growth. It can become a context for a continuing encounter with the self, through the process of interaction with another self. Two consciousnesses, each dedicated to personal evolution, can provide an extraordinary stimulus and challenge to each other.

But such a possibility presupposes self-esteem. The first love affair we must consummate successfully is with ourselves; only then are we ready for a relationship with another. A person who feels unworthy and unlovable is not ready for romantic love.

Of course, there are other kinds of love besides romantic love. What I feel for my grandchildren is a different kind of love. What it has in common with romantic love, however, is that I see in my grandchildren values and traits that touch my heart. But it would be a corruption of language to say that I “love” my grandchildren the same as I “love” children whom I do not even know. Whatever my feelings for other children, the experience is entirely different.

Apart from what I feel for my wife, Devers—who is the highest value in my life—writing is my paramount passion. What this means, practically, is that a good deal of my time and energy is devoted to writing. This has to do with living one’s values, not simply professing them.

You ask, “How do I bring love into my life?” My answer is that I focus day after day principally on what I care most about in this world—on what I most respect and admire. That is what I give my time and attention to.

Since my highest priorities are my marriage and my work, I give the greatest part of my time and energy to them. With regard to my wife, I frequently communicate to her my awareness of all the traits and characteristics in her that I so much love, respect, appreciate, and admire.

We all want to be seen, understood, appreciated. I call this the need for the experience of psychological visibility. I strive to make my wife feel visible to me.

I also spend a great deal of time thinking about the things I love. I am keenly aware of how much there is in life to appreciate and enjoy. I dwell on that every day. I do not take anything good in my life for granted.

I am always aware of our mortality. I know that if I love someone, the time to express it is today. If I value something, the time to honor it is today.