

Love is Not a Feeling

M. Scott Peck

One result of the mysterious nature of love is that no one has ever, to my knowledge, arrived at a truly satisfactory definition of love. In an effort to explain it, therefore, love has been divided into various categories: eros, philia, agape; perfect love and imperfect love, and so on. I am presuming, however, to give a single definition of love, again with the awareness that it is likely to be in some way or ways inadequate. I define love thus: The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.

The act of extending one's limits implies effort. One extends one's limits only by exceeding them, and exceeding limits requires effort. When we love someone our love becomes demonstrable or real only through our exertion – through the fact that for that someone (or for ourself) we take an extra step or walk an extra mile. Love is not effortless. To the contrary, love is effortful.

By use of the word “will” I have attempted to transcend the distinction between desire and action. Desire is not necessarily translated into action. Will is desire of sufficient intensity that it *is* translated into action. The difference between the two is equal to the difference between saying “I would like to go swimming tonight” and “I will go swimming tonight.” Everyone in our culture desires to some extent to be loving, yet many are not in fact loving. I therefore conclude that the desire to love is not itself love. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love. No matter how much we may think we are loving, if we are in fact not loving, it is because we have chosen not to love and therefore do not despite our good intentions. On the other hand, whenever we do actually exert ourselves in the cause of spiritual growth, it is because we have chosen to do so.

Of all the misconceptions about love the most powerful and pervasive is the belief that “falling in love” is love or at least one of the manifestations of love. It is a potent misconception, because falling in love is subjectively experienced in a very powerful fashion as an experience of love. When a person falls in love what he or she certainly

feels is “I love him” or “I love her”. But two problems are immediately apparent. The first is that the experience of falling in love is specifically a sex-linked erotic experience. We do not fall in love with our children even though we may love them very deeply. We do not fall in love with our friends of the same sex - unless we are homosexually oriented – even though we may care for them greatly. We fall in love only when we are consciously or unconsciously sexually motivated. The second problem is that the experience of falling in love is invariably temporary. No matter whom we fall in love with, we sooner or later fall out of love if the relationship continues long enough. This is not to say that we invariably cease loving the person with whom we fell in love. But it is to say that the feeling of ecstatic lovingness that characterizes the experience of falling in love always passes. The honeymoon always ends. The bloom of romance always fades.

The essence of the phenomenon of falling in love is a sudden collapse of a section of an individual's ego boundaries, permitting one to merge his or her identity with that of another person. The sudden release of oneself from oneself, the explosive pouring out of oneself into the beloved, and the dramatic surcease of loneliness accompanying this collapse of ego boundaries are experienced by most of us as ecstatic. We and our beloved are one! Loneliness is no more!

In some respects (but certainly not in all) the act of falling in love is an act of regression. The experience of merging with the loved one has in it echoes from that time when we were merged with our mothers in infancy. Along with the merging we also re-experience the sense of omnipotence which we had to give up in our journey out of childhood. All things seem possible! United with our beloved we feel we can conquer all obstacles. We believe that the strength of our love will cause the forces of opposition to bow down in submission and melt away into the darkness. All problems will be overcome. The unreality of these feelings when we have fallen in love is essentially the same as the unreality of the two-year-old who feels itself to be king of the family and the world with power unlimited.

Just as reality intrudes upon the two-year-old's fantasy of omnipotence so does reality intrude upon the fantastic unity of the couple who have fallen in love. Sooner or later, in response to the problems of daily living, individual will reasserts itself. He wants to have sex; she doesn't. She wants to go to the movies; he doesn't. He wants to put

money in the bank; she wants a dishwasher. She wants to talk about her job; he wants to talk about his. She doesn't like his friends; he doesn't like hers. So both of them, in the privacy of their hearts, begin to come to the sickening realization that they are not one with the beloved, that the beloved has and will continue to have his or her own desires, tastes, prejudices, and timing different from the other's. One by one, gradually or suddenly, the ego boundaries snap back into place; gradually or suddenly, they fall out of love. Once again they are two separate individuals. At this point they begin either to dissolve the ties of their relationship or to initiate the work of real loving.

By my use of the word "real" I am implying that the perception that we are loving when we fall in love is a false perception – that our subjective sense of lovingness is an illusion. By stating that it is when a couple falls out of love they may begin to really love I am also implying that real love does not have its roots in a feeling of love. To the contrary, real love often occurs in a context in which the feeling of love is lacking, when we act lovingly despite the fact that we don't feel loving. Assuming the reality of the definition of love with which we started, the experience of "falling in love" is not real love, for the several reasons that follow.

Falling in love is not an act of will. It is not a conscious choice. No matter how open to or eager for it we may be, the experience may still elude us. Contrarily, the experience may capture us at times when we are definitely not seeking it, when it is inconvenient and undesirable. We are as likely to fall in love with someone with whom we are obviously ill-matched as with someone more suitable. Indeed, we may not even like or admire the object of our passion, yet try as we might, we may not be able to fall in love with a person whom we deeply respect and with whom a deep relationship would be in all ways desirable. We can choose how to respond to the experience of falling in love, but we cannot choose the experience itself.

Falling in love is not an extension of one's limits or boundaries; it is a partial and temporary collapse of them. The extension of one's limits requires effort; falling in love is effortless. Lazy and undisciplined individuals are as likely to fall in love as energetic and dedicated ones. Once the precious moment of falling in love has passed and the boundaries have snapped back into place, the individual may be disillusioned, but is usually none the larger for the experience. When limits are extended or stretched, however, they tend to stay stretched.

Real love is a permanently self-enlarging experience. Falling in love is not.

Falling in love has little to do with purposively nurturing one's spiritual development. If we have any purpose in mind when we fall in love is to terminate our own loneliness and perhaps insure this result through marriage. Certainly we are not thinking of spiritual development. Indeed after we have fallen in love and before we have fallen out of love again we feel that we have arrived, that the heights have been attained, that there is both no need and no possibility of going higher. We do not feel ourselves to be in any need of development; we are totally content to be where we are. Nor do we perceive our beloved as being in need of spiritual development. To the contrary, we perceive him or her as perfect as having been perfected. If we see any faults in our beloved, we perceive them as insignificant – little quirks or darling eccentricities that only add color and charm.

If falling in love is not love, then what is it other than a temporary and partial collapse of ego boundaries? I do not know. But the sexual specificity of the phenomenon leads me to suspect that it is a genetically determined instinctual component of mating behavior. In other words, the temporary collapse of ego boundaries that constitutes falling in love a stereotypic response of human beings to a configuration of internal sexual drives and external sexual stimuli, which serves to increase the probability of sexual pairing and bonding so as to enhance the survival of the species. Or to put it in another, rather crass way, falling in love is a trick that our genes pull on our otherwise perceptive mind to hoodwink or trap us into marriage. Without this trick, this illusory and inevitably temporary (it would not be practical if it were not temporary) regression to infantile merging and omnipotence, many of us who are happily or unhappily married today would have retreated in wholehearted terror from the realism of the marriage vows.

Love is an action, an activity. Love is not a feeling. Many, many people possessing a feeling of love and even acting in response to that feeling act in all manner of unloving and destructive ways. On the other hand, a genuinely loving individual will often take loving and constructive action toward a person he or she consciously dislikes, actually feeling no love toward the person at the time and perhaps even finding the person repugnant in some way.

The feeling of love is the emotion that accompanies the experience of cathecting. Cathecting is the process by which an object becomes important to us. Once cathected, the object, commonly referred to as a “love object,” is invested with energy as if it were a part of ourselves, and this relationship between us and the invested object is called a cathexis. The misconception that love is a feeling exists because we confuse cathecting with loving. This confusion is understandable since they are similar processes, but there are also striking differences. First of all, we may cathect any object, animate or inanimate, with or without a spirit. Thus a person may cathect the stock market or a piece of jewelry and may feel love for these things. Second, the fact that we have cathected another human being does not mean that we care a whit for that person’s spiritual development. The dependent person, in fact, usually fears the spiritual development of a cathected spouse. The mother who insisted upon driving her adolescent son to and from school clearly cathected the boy; he was important to her – but his spiritual growth was not. Third, the intensity of our cathexes frequently has nothing to do with wisdom or commitment. Two strangers may meet in a bar and cathect each other in such a way that nothing – not previously scheduled appointments, promises made, or family stability – is more important for the moment than their sexual consummation. Finally, our cathexes may be fleeting and momentary. Immediately following their sexual consummation the just mentioned couple may find each other unattractive and undesirable.

Genuine love, on the other hand, implies commitment and the exercise of wisdom. When we are concerned for someone’s spiritual growth, we know that a lack of commitment is likely to be harmful and that commitment to that person is probably necessary for us to manifest our concern effectively. In a constructive marriage, just as in constructive therapy, the partners must regularly, routinely and predictably, attend to each other and their relationship no matter how they feel. As has been mentioned, couples sooner or later always fall out of love, and it is at the moment when the mating instinct has run its course that the opportunity for genuine love begins. It is when the spouses no longer feel like being in each other’s company always, when they would rather be elsewhere some of the time, that their love begins to be tested and will be found to be present or absent.

This not to say that the partners in a stable, constructive relationship such as intensive psychotherapy or marriage do not cathect

each other and the relationship itself in various ways; they do. What it does say is that genuine love transcends the matter of cathexes. When love exists it does so with or without cathexis and with or without a loving feeling. It is easier – indeed, it is fun – to love with cathexis and the feeling of love. But it is possible to love without cathexis and without loving feelings and it is in the fulfillment of this possibility that genuine and transcendent love is distinguished from simple cathexis. The key word in this distinction is “will.” I have defined love as the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth. Genuine love is volitional rather than emotional. The person who truly loves does so because of a decision to love. This person has made a commitment to be loving whether or not the loving feeling is present. True love is not a feeling by which we are overwhelmed. It is a committed, thoughtful decision.

The common tendency to confuse love with the feeling of love allows people all manner of self-deception. An alcoholic man, whose wife and children are desperately in need of his attention at that very moment, may be sitting in a bar with tears in his eyes, telling the bartender, “I really love my family.” People who neglect their children in the grossest of ways more often than not will consider themselves the most loving of parents. It is clear that there may be a self-serving quality in this tendency to confuse love with the feeling of love; it is easy and not at all unpleasant to find evidence of love in one’s feelings. It may be difficult and painful to search for evidence of love in one’s actions. But because true love is an act of will that often transcends ephemeral feelings of love or cathexis, it is correct to say, “Love is as love does.”

Stirring the Oatmeal

Robert Johnson

Many years ago a wise friend gave me a name for human love. She called it “stirring-the-oatmeal” love. She was right: Within this phrase, if we will humble ourselves enough to look, is the very essence of what human love is, and it shows us the principal differences between human love and romance.

Stirring the oatmeal is a humble act – not exciting or thrilling. But it symbolizes a relatedness that brings love down to earth. It represents a willingness to share ordinary human life, to find meaning in the simple, unromantic tasks: earning a living, living within a budget, putting out the garbage, feeding the baby in the middle of the night. To “stir the oatmeal” means to find the relatedness, the value, even the beauty, in simple and ordinary things, not to eternally demand a cosmic drama, an entertainment, or an extraordinary intensity in everything. Like the rice hulling of the Zen monks, the spinning wheel of Gandhi, the tent making of Saint Paul, it represents the discovery of the sacred in the midst of the humble and ordinary.

Jung once said that feeling is a matter of the *small*. And in human love, we can see that it is true. The real relatedness between two people is experienced in the small tasks they do together: the quiet conversation when the day’s upheavals are at rest, the soft word of understanding, the daily companionship, the encouragement offered in a difficult moment, the small gift when least expected, the spontaneous gesture of love.

When a couple is genuinely related to each other, they are willing to enter into the whole spectrum of human life together. They transform even the unexciting, difficult, and mundane things into a joyful and fulfilling component of life. By contrast, romantic love can only last so long as a couple are “high” on one another, so long as the money lasts and the entertainments are exciting. “Stirring the oatmeal” means that two people take their love off the airy level of exciting fantasy and convert it into earthy, practical immediacy.

Love is content to do many things that ego is bored with. Love is willing to work with the other person’s moods and unreasonableness. Love is willing to fix breakfast and balance the checkbook. Love is willing to do these “oatmeal” things of life because it is related to a person, not a projection.

Human love sees another person as an individual and makes an individualized relationship to him or her. Romantic love sees the other person only as a role player in the drama.

A man’s human love desires that a woman become a complete and independent person and encourages her to be herself. Romantic love only affirms what he would like her to be, so that she could be identical to anima. So long as romance rules a man, he affirms a woman only insofar as she is willing to change, so that she may reflect his projected ideal. Romance is never happy with the other person just as he or she is.

Human love necessarily includes friendship: friendship within relationship, within marriage, between husband and wife. When a man and a woman are truly friends, they know each other’s difficult points and weaknesses, but they are not inclined to stand in judgement on them. They are more concerned with helping each other and enjoying each other than they are with finding fault.

Friends, genuine friends, want to affirm rather than to judge; they don’t coddle, but neither do they dwell on our inadequacies. Friends back each other up in the tough times, help each other with the sordid and ordinary tasks of life. They don’t impose impossible standards on each other, they don’t ask for perfection, and they help each other rather than grind each other down with demands.

In romantic love there is no friendship. Romance and friendship are utterly opposed energies, natural enemies with completely opposing motives. Sometimes people say: “I don’t want to be friends with my husband [or wife]; it would take all the romance out of marriage.” It is true: Friendship does take the artificial drama and intensity out of a relationship, but it also takes away the egocentricity and the impossibility and replaces the drama with something human and real.

If a man and woman are friends to each other, then they are “neighbors” as well as lovers; their relationship is suddenly subject to Christ’s dictum: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” One of the glaring

contradictions in romantic love is that so many couples treat their friends with so much more kindness, consideration, generosity, and forgiveness than they ever give to one another! When people are with their friends, they are charming, helpful, and courteous. But when they come home, they often vent all their anger, resentments, moods, and frustrations on each other. Strangely, they treat their friends better than they do each other.

When two people are “in love,” people commonly say that they are “more than just friends.” But in the long run, they seem to treat each other as *less* than friends. Most people think that being “in love” is a much more intimate, much more “meaningful” relationship than “mere” friendship. Why, then, do couples refuse each other the selfless love, the kindness and good will, that they readily give to their friends? People can’t ask of their friends that they carry all their projections, be scapegoats for all their moods, keep them feeling happy, and make life complete for them. Why do couples impose these demands on each other? Because the cult of romance teaches us that we have the right to expect that all our fantasies made to come true – in the person we are “in love” with. In one of the Hindu rites of marriage, the bride and groom make to each other a solemn statement: “You will be my *best friend*.” Western couples need to learn to be friends, to live with each other in a spirit of friendship, to take the quality of friendship as a guide through the tangles we have made of love.