

Love, a German American Perspective  
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In the fall of 1965, a Sunday school class at a Unitarian Universalist Church introduced me to a little book about love. I paid my sixty cents for the 140-page paperback and took it home to read. As a teenager the title of the book excited me — *The Art of Loving*. I had high expectations. In the privacy of my room, I skimmed the pages quickly. It did not turn out to be what I had expected.

Disappointed at first, for a time I barely glanced at the book and I paid little attention to the Sunday discussions. However, over a period of weeks I became motivated to look more closely. As I read the chapters, some pieces of the puzzle of life fell into place. My teenage world, which had seemed confused and chaotic, suddenly seemed to make more sense.

The author of the book was Erich Fromm, a German Jew, a refugee from the Nazis. His basic position, the idea that gave me insight as a teenager, is in the second chapter. He wrote:

The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love is the source of shame. It is the source of guilt and anxiety. The deepest need of human beings, then, is the need to overcome our separateness, to leave the prison of our aloneness.

In the years, since I first read this book I have read many other books on philosophy and psychology, and I have taken many classes on such subjects. I have also been involved in many human relationships, some of great intensity lasting over a considerable time. I have matured a great deal, both intellectually and emotionally. My understanding of human nature and of human relationships has developed considerably from what it was when I was a teenager.

The ideas of Erich Fromm attracted me because he put into words a philosophy of love I learned as a child. This may be because Fromm was a German in ethnic background and a German-American mother raised me. She taught me to restrain the expression of emotion. My family of origin taught me the importance of clear borders between others and me. They taught me to place less emphasis on being warm and loving and more on fairness and justice. They taught me to regard feelings as unreliable and unstable.

In the 1980s, I watched on public television as an Italian named Leo Buscaglia emphasizing the value of positive human touch, especially hugs. This association with hugging became his trademark at lectures, where thousands of people would stand patiently waiting to hug him after a presentation. He would often give a talk of about an hour, and then stay afterwards hugging the members of the audience. I greatly admired the positive lectures of Leo Buscaglia. I have also observed the popularity of Italian American Unitarian Universalist ministers. We do not have many, but they are often more emotionally expressive, much more huggable than most of our clergy who come from British or German American backgrounds. They show feelings of warmth and caring toward others.

In contrast hugging strangers has always been difficult for me. My German American culture taught me only to hug close friends and family members.

Our own cultural backgrounds limit each of us, and my German-American background limits me. Nevertheless, my heritage has taught me three things about love that I have found valuable in my own life. This morning, I want to share the three with you.

### I. Erich Fromm

First, back in high school and college I watched movies and heard songs that told me I needed only to find the right partner, my soul mate. This would solve all my problems. I was encouraged to believe that love is the outcome of a spontaneous, emotional reaction, the result of the sudden grip of an irresistible feeling. As a teenager this is how I approached dating. I found the first few days of a new relationship very intense and exciting. However, after I was in such a relationship for a time, I notice that it was not a state of endless bliss. The nagging problems that go with human relationships had not disappeared. Dating the same person over time required sensitivity, understanding, compromise, patience, diplomacy, attention and energy. Being with another person can be taxing and demanding.

In time, I went back and read Erich Fromm's words in his book about loving. He wrote:

If two people who have been strangers, as all of us are, suddenly let the wall between them break down, and feel close, feel one, this moment of oneness is one of the most exhilarating, most exciting experiences in life. It is all the more wonderful and miraculous for persons who have been shut off, isolated, without love. This miracle of sudden intimacy is often facilitated if it is combined with, or initiated by, sexual attraction and sexual fulfillment. However, this type of love is by its very nature not lasting. The two persons become well acquainted, their intimacy loses more and more of its miraculous character, until their antagonism, their disappointments, their mutual boredom kill whatever is left of the initial excitement.

In other words, Fromm was not comfortable with the idea that we fall in love with our sole mate. To fall in love is to be swept up passively into a relationship without taking deliberate responsibility for what we are doing. Often when we hear the word love on television or in the movies, it refers to this passive collapse into the arms of another.

People have come to speak of romance or love addiction. Love addiction is a psychological craving for the high that we feel at the beginning of a new relationship. People, who suffer from this love addiction, fall in love, break up, and fall in love again repeating this pattern, to experience repeatedly the excitement of a new relationship.

I came to agree with Erich Fromm, that mature love is not infatuation. This realization hit home gradually. I abandoned my belief in spontaneous chemistry. Mature love, the quality that is characteristic of stable, satisfying long-term relationships is a deliberate intentional decision—a judgment, a promise, an act of intentional will. A strong feeling of attraction may accompany

this deliberate decision. However, if love were only a feeling, then no foundation would exist for a relationship to last through the inevitable problems. In defining mature love, I begin by suggesting that we make an intentional commitment.

## II. Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

The writer Kurt Vonnegut Jr., who died in 2007, hinted at my second suggestion about love. I am a fan of Kurt Vonnegut. I like his imagination, his irony and his sense of justice. German-American Unitarian parents in Indianapolis raised him. In a lecture at the UUA General Assembly, the annual meeting of our association in 1986, Vonnegut said,

The Christian preachers exhort their listeners to love one another, and to love their neighbors and so on. Love is simply too strong a word to be much use in ordinary, day-to-day relationships. Love is for Romeo and Juliet.

In one of his books, Vonnegut puts his doubts about the word love even more bluntly. He wrote,

I am highly suspicious of love. If somebody says "I love you," to me, I feel as though I had a pistol pointed at my head. What can anybody reply under such conditions but that which the pistol-holder requires? "I love you, too." The hell with love, and hooray for something else, which I can't even begin to name or describe.

Like Vonnegut, all my life I have been very reserved in my use of the word love. By limiting the use of the phrase "I love you," the phrase becomes more powerful, more meaningful. When someone uses the phrase repeatedly, it becomes less sacred, less special. I worked as a dishwasher in a Swiss hotel. I helped a European waiter write a letter to his English girlfriend in London. He included the phrase "I love you" in several places. My friend was also involved with a Canadian woman working as a house cleaner at the hotel, who he also said that he loved. I suggested that he was over using the phrase. He explained that he did love both women and that both loved to hear him say it. Words, I thought, are easy. Actions, like being honest and keeping commitments, are hard.

I have seen great importance attached to declarations of love. I have seen the word love worshiped. I have heard couples say that, no matter what else they do, if they continue to say that love each other, everything will be all right.

I have heard people say, "Yes, I made a mistake; yes, I was rude; yes, I was late for dinner; yes, I made love to another person; yes, I got drunk—but I still love my partner with all my heart." This declaration of love is supposed to overcome all transgressions, all conflicts, and all problems. In many relationships, this attempt to make an idol out of the word love holds relationships together for long periods. The symbol can sustain the relationship long after the substance is gone.

However, I have come to believe that mature love dwells in substance, not in the symbol. Love is people being honest with each other, respecting each other, trying to understand each other, trying to be sensitive to each other's needs for days, weeks, months and years. My love for others

exists in my respect, my understanding, my caring and my commitment to others.

Mature love exists in behavior, not in rhetoric. The essence of love is an uplifting and constructive action toward another human being. Love is not just saying the words; it is an act, a deed, a happening, a daily demonstration.

The substance replaces the symbol, and we move toward an experience beyond words. Vonnegut says, "To hell with love and hooray for something else, which I can't even begin to name or to describe."

### III. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Erich Fromm taught that mature love is first an act of will, not the sudden grip of an irresistible feeling. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. suggested that love is more what I do instead of what I say. I want to add a third element to complete this brief description. I first started to think about this third element when I began to study the writings of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who was born in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. She came to America after World War II.

Kubler-Ross taught that love is a process of saying hello and good-bye. The longer I live, the more conscious I become that life is a process of many births and many deaths. People are constantly moving in and out of my life. As I see these changes, I become more and more aware that to love fully I need to learn how to let go of the past and greet the future. I need to learn to trust in my heart that every good-bye will lead to a new hello.

In my life, I have had times when I found it difficult letting go and saying good-bye. I have had times when I did not trust that another moment would come, that I would experience another birth, another spring. I wanted to grab onto the good moments and I tried to make them eternal and universally significant. Sometimes in my life I have distrusted the future, I have feared that I would not have new experiences.

However, over the years I have learned to be open to that which is new in my life. I have learned to welcome new people, new ideas, and new experiences. As part of the same process, I have learned to move beyond the past. I have chosen to work through my feelings of grief, to work through my anger, my denial, my depression.

I see this need to learn to say hello and good-bye most clearly in relationship to children. The birth of a child requires both a big welcome and a willingness to say a good-bye too much of past freedoms. The growth of a child is a constant series of good-byes and hellos reaching all the way into adulthood.

However, the need to say hello and good-bye is equally important in all mature loving relationships, not just in the relationship between a parent and a child. In a long-term relationship with another person, it is essential that I be willing to allow that person to grow and unfold in his or her own way. It is also essential that I learn to let go of the disappointments and the tragedies, to deal with the consequences without denying what has happened, but then to put the bad experiences behind me, say good-bye to them, and move on.

In this regard, faith continues to be a word that is important to me. I find that I do not experience mature love once and for all. I reach a certain level of maturity and then things change. People change. I change. I need to say good-bye to the past and embrace the present and the future. Having faith is a good way to describe how I make it through these experiences. I bring forth a courage at the core of my being, a trust that life is worth all that goes into it.

I include these three elements in my definition of mature love. First, love is an act of will and not a spontaneous emotional reaction. Second, love is more what I do instead of what I say. Third, love requires an ability to say good-bye and hello.

My family of origin taught me these three points, especially my German American mother. Her Mennonite ancestors came to this country in the 1884. They were the people who first taught me about love. This is where we all first learn about love, from the embraces of our fathers and mothers.

Whatever way we express our love, it is fundamental to human life. A scholar asked Jesus "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

Jesus answered, "The first is 'you are to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your energy.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"