

Out of Love

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Romantic love so often doesn't work because it isn't rooted in human traditions.

In the long course of our culture's evolution, romantic love has become the primary post-pubescent source of affection in our world. But it has not always occupied this special position. It may be a universal in human experience, but in our globalizing monoculture, romance has intensified over the millennia into a distorted caricature of versions common in tribal and Neolithic village societies.

Romantic love offers an acutely intensified form of love, a delicacy extracted from sources that are much less intense, but, over time, more deeply and evenly satisfying.

Two of these sources are a) community and b) nature, inadequate labels meaning, very roughly: a) a small group of trustworthy individuals/families whose interdependent, face-to-face personal support is the basis of their survival; and b) the features of the group's local environment that are not man-made.

Our contemporary definitions no longer recognize these very bland-seeming sources of love, but if we really want to feel held, safe, loved, there may be no substitute.

Judging, at the very least, from the recent track record of our nuclear families and binary love relationships, it should be clear that two is not enough. We are constantly being told, mostly indirectly, that two should be sufficient, that one or both of you are the problem if the two of you are not working out.

For humans, we should be learning by now that two doesn't work. To claim that people are meant to live in tribe-like communities or that community living can't be brutal and ugly is neither useful nor true. And, it is also the case that marriage (mono- and polygamous, hetero- and homosexual, serial and life-lasting) and household units have been common features of tribal and small village life.

But the basic form of social organization of the tribe and small village, within which marital households are sustained and nested, is a form that worked, to get the love as well as the food they require over the course of human evolution and has prevailed as the way of life for 99 percent of that history. Community life works for people in the same way that pack life works for wolves.

As a very basic form it provides a basis, a necessary condition, for living well, including getting the love we need, delivered in the form of care and devotion, sustained and reliable.

At least two particular features of traditional tribal and village life are noteworthy as powerful sources of love in these communities. The first is culture, distinct and local, which guides the thinking and behavior of people living in traditional communities. Culture also provides meaning. The guidance and meaning culture provides constitute an indirect source of love for its members growing into the world they inhabit.

The modern, especially urban child is exposed to cultural variety, but also cultural confusion and contention. We are lost and anxious in the stew of the mixed messages we receive from the Big (global, nontraditional) Culture and the remnants of its assimilated subcultures.

The second feature common among traditional societies is an infant care practice that essentially inoculates children with a starter dose of love in the first months of life. Slipped from the womb directly into the warm hands

of community members, newborns are virtually never let go by these hands and warm bodies until they push away several months later, ready for the independence of crawling and toddling.

The initial in-arms phase is associated with on-demand breastfeeding, which continues through the child's first few years, again, until the child stops coming around altogether. The love and knowledge stored up in these early months and years makes for an older child and adult who is confident and secure, loved and secure in love.

The love we derive from the land, directly and indirectly through the network of community relationships, is less obvious, but only because it is obscured by the profound alienation from the earth that has accompanied life in the modern world. A serious consequence of this alienation has been a silent, but deeply profound loss of reverence, and gratitude.

We cannot give thanks for gifts we can't see or recognize. We all know what Mother Earth means on some level. The sun and the earth, very especially the small patch of the earth that traditionally each tribe and village intimately knew, worshipped and relied on for survival, are the ultimate sources of love, of care and devotion. They provide and keep providing, from cradle to grave.

Romantic attraction, to the extent that it is an embellishment of sexual attraction, is probably universal in human experience. However, in the course of our civilization's development we have accentuated romantic love to reinforce a host of other forces in our culture that pry the individual from the community.

On one hand, the operating system of our culture, globalization, compels it to absorb the many diverse cultures of the world into a formal unity, but under the sign of a heartless market. On the other, within its globalizing mass, the culture relentlessly separates its members from each other starting at birth and fragments much of our lives, what we think and what we do.

Romantic love achieves exaggerated prominence as a cultural tool to isolate pairs from the group, reinforcing the rugged individualism valued by our culture. Bad endings in love are culturally supported for the same purpose. The isolated pair becomes two separate and more isolated as individuals. The economy of our culture feasts on love-needy, separated individuals. Consumerism feeds on lost love and the loss of the personal and material support provided by communities and land bases.

In this dark age of failing love, people are resorting to a variety of ways to fill the void, beyond increasingly desperate attempts at romantic relationships. Sex, very noticeably, has been distilled from love of any sort. Addiction and compulsion in general, so widespread and intense in our society, may be functions of love lost, at least in part.

And, there are the countless, more subtle ways we compensate. There is a rebound quality to all of our love affairs, as well as to the various substitutes. With every romantic attraction, fulfilled and unfulfilled, we are rebounding from a break-up, from our broken relationship with the caregivers of the community and the natural environment that for most of us have grown distant well beyond memory.

Without the love we need, we hurt. We hurt others. We internalize the hurt and hurt ourselves. We're becoming a society of junkies, in the grip of cultural forces, collective patterns of thinking and acting, that we did not design or ever consciously endorse. We sustain these forces, however, through the unconscious sponsorship of our minds, every day.

Then, through our choices and the patterns of our every day collective behavior. Short on love, long on addiction, violence, domination. Love does not pass easily in our world.

At the very least and short of any measures we might take to rework our world, we can and must unblock the pathways of love, both within ourselves—to love ourselves—and between ourselves and others, as best we can. At the individual level, the struggle to love and be loved should not be abandoned as we begin to grasp how little we get from our efforts.

Falling and being in love are uniquely beautiful experiences. Something so irresistible has nonetheless become so full of disappointment. Failed love is more a consequence of excessive expectations than of conflict or loss of interest.

At a powerfully emotional level, we unconsciously expect our lover to fill us with all the love we have lost over the decades and centuries forfeited by living the way we now collectively do. Plumbing the depths of this disconnect between expectation and outcome can surely help us adjust the former, and our perspective more generally, as we proceed in relationship and partnership building.

Collectively, we must rework our world; conspire (from the Latin *conspirare*; to plot together; literally, to breathe together) to renounce the mythologies of our culture, to begin or continue to re-form small-scale communities, and to re-acquaint ourselves with the sustaining earth and sky around us.

Into this wider and deeper basket of care, the love that lovers enjoy will find a home.

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