

Essay

A Discourse on Love

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Prelude

In *love, again*, a novel by Doris Lessing, the subject is a woman my age, mid-sixties, who, inexplicably, finds herself “in love” after twenty dry years in which her work had provided both purpose and fulfillment. Then, after that first shocking flutter of the heart, she found herself, over the next few months, falling in love again and again and again—with different men in turn, most of them wildly inappropriate — to the point where she had to realize that whatever “in love” meant, it had nothing to do with the men that she desired. She then fell into a leaden, depressed state where she experienced her actual physical heart as ponderously heavy, burdened with mysterious, utterly unbearable pain and desolation — and a thirst, a hunger, a longing for the Other so extreme as to make her consider suicide. As her awakening to love had astonished and embarrassed her, so the subsequent descent into an unimaginably deep dark-night-of-the-soul overwhelmed and frightened her.

Doris Lessing’s character had not enjoyed/endured my kind of experimental, peripatetic life wherein gradually, over a period of decades and a number of intense relationships, I learned, over and over again, and more and more quickly, to detach from the ecstasy and agony that love threw my way. Rather, she experienced the lover’s wild leap and devastating fall all at once, in a sort of Midsummer Night’s Dream phantasmagoria, during a year that she considered the gateway to her life’s finale. And

though she did find that powerful experience instructive, in that it demonstrated her own vulnerability to what she had considered human foolishness, the novel ends almost where it began, with a stoicism now tinged with bewilderment and regret.

This essay is driven by an effort to understand and describe the door that can open when we move through the bitterness that attends our discovery of the heart's terrible longing.

Introduction

One woman's remark, decades ago, still reverberates in memory. We were on a ski tour at the base of the Tetons. She was dressed in parka, muffler, gloves, headband, and — earrings! I asked her, why earrings?

“Because I'm still the huntress,” she replied, very matter of fact.

She was single at the time. I was married.

She's right. The state of “being single” does seem to be accompanied by its own set of accessories, not to mention states of mind. I wince to remember years of being seized awake in the middle of the night by fixations on men that sparked feelings in various shades of seeking, keeping, coveting, letting go, regretting, wondering, wishing, longing, pretending, hoping, and obsessing.

These internal states accompany any woman still “on the hunt.” And, since I worked as a professional astrologer, while lying there at 2 A.M. tensed with desire, frustration, hurt, regret and/or bitterness I would also flip men's charts up on the insides of my eyelids and compare them to my own chart, one after another. Unlike counting sheep, this intricate analysis would jerk me into hyper-alertness. I'd bound out of bed, grab the

astrological ephemeris, look again for clues. Who is Mr. Right? Who is The One? Will I ever find him? Or, how did I let him get away? How could he have left me?

You know the drill.

I'm so glad it's over.

My family is glad it's over too. Yet one of my nieces tells me that her mother, a devout Catholic, still keeps my picture on her bedside table and prays for me nightly.

But what, exactly, is “over”? Intimate relationships with men? At sixty-four, do I now head into old age with head bowed, forever widowed? Somehow, I doubt it. I remain an exquisitely alive and sensuous human, wildly attracted to other humans. And I remain dedicated to both experience and understanding of male/female relationships as primary fuel for the human evolutionary thrust.

My family looks upon my peripatetic path with curiosity and alarm. I, in turn, view their long-term partnerships with curiosity and bemusement. What would my life have been like had I followed this path? And what would I have learned from such a life — not to mention, when would I have known I learned it? Not until my deathbed, I suspect. Who knows what goes on inside our deepest being while we still move through time; and inside the common core of a couple may reside what I have come to revere as the holy of holies — a mystery I don't ever expect to fathom.

I realize that last statement is ambiguous.

Do I mean that I don't pretend to understand what goes on inside the heart of long-term couples? Yes. I certainly do mean that. And though I don't understand them, I've observed some marriages over the decades, including those of my parents, my seven siblings and one of my sons.

I have learned to respect their commitments, and to rejoice in their capacity for longevity, for I can sense how each person has deepened, over time, as an individual. In this chaotic era of fractured families, mine is unusual in that, for most of its members,

marriage does apparently serve as an alchemical vessel for personal and interpersonal transformation.

I bless them. Though I do not fathom what they have, I sense it well worth having.

But the other implication unsettles me. For it could mean that I don't expect to ever engage in another long-term male/female relationship in this life. Is this true? And if so, why? Because it's too late, I'm too old at 64? Well, certainly, too old to ever celebrate a 60-year anniversary, like my parents did a few years ago. But not too old for say, 10-, or 20-, or maybe even a 30-year run.

Would I want that? I'm not sure. First of all, the obvious: most men my age, and some years younger, not only look and act, but actually *are* physiologically older than I, sinking into decrepitude. They did not institute healthful food and exercise patterns when younger, and now bulge with bellies, varicosities, and florid, swollen faces. Their backs hurt, they take medication, their shoulders hunch, they limp, they're probably impotent — all turnoffs, and not just from a standpoint of physical attraction. I can see the writing on the wall: sooner or later, and most likely sooner, I'd have to sacrifice my own life and needs as a caregiver.

So, from a purely selfish perspective, why would I want to nurse a man with whom I had no history through old age, illness, death?

On the other hand, I imagine that if we had schlepped comfortably through morning and evening routines for decades, we would hardly have noticed when our skin lost its luster and our hands started to shake; our rich and detailed memories — of children, crises overcome, trips taken, mutual friendships, homes and careers lived in and let go — all food for thought and endless stories — would have cemented a shared reality.

Moreover, any friction in our early years would have sloughed off the dross; we'd be reduced to a bright clear flame, a singularity long fed by the encouragement of the one other who knows and cherishes us, warts and all.

In such a context, of a loving, long-term companionship, I imagine that by the time one of us grew more frail than the other, or got sick or disabled, the stronger, healthier one would naturally surrender to the other's increasing need, no matter what the sacrifice required, or for how long.

But meeting a man when he's old? Getting the downside with none of the goodies?

How crass this sounds. Makes me want to issue a challenge to the Other who would dare to greet me, soul to soul. Hey you! Surprise me! Shine your full self through that decaying bag of bones!

In actuality, I don't even know if I'd like surprises. Not now. Not anymore. Or, is this just a crone's time-out?

Individuation

I'm astonished to recognize that for the first time in my life I feel complete, whole; that I no longer seem to need to project parts of myself onto men.

I've enjoyed this new sense of internal integration for perhaps the past six months, and I must say it feels strange, alien, as if a different person occupies this body.

I'm not used to the sense that there's nothing left to "do" in the arena of relationships, that just to "be" on my own, in company with others on occasion but more often alone, is enough. Indeed, I dare say that this new status feels fine; indeed, luxurious, immensely satisfying.

Jung would call my new sense of internal wholeness “individuation,” since I have apparently succeeded — at least for now! — in letting go of projections onto men, which means, in psychoanalytic terms, that I’ve internally integrated the various *animus* figures that I so desperately sought in the outside world. Rather than needing to magnetize a man with this or that set of qualities as my companion, I seem to have uncovered these qualities in myself and feel quite content.

I have yet to find a woman with whom I can discuss this still new internal state-change. Most of my female friends are either married, still on the hunt or trying to land a skittish partner, or they are done with relationships — not because they feel internally whole, but because either they feel they’re too old and/or their so-called “failed relationships” have left them bitter and cynical.

I don’t fit into any of those categories. For, despite my “newly integrated” condition and my apparent “time-out,” I still find myself in mutual frisson with men. I do not pursue these attractions, but I do enjoy them.

So, What is love?

When we meet another for whom we feel a romantic attraction, we tend to describe our initial hook-up as “falling in love.” Within six months to two years, the intensity of the initial attraction normally fades, or at least ratchets way down. The great light that seemed to emanate from the Other has been turned off, stripping them of beauty, brains, sensitivity, range of interests, talents, animal magnetism, experience, and so on — whatever it was that drew us to them in the first place. This on/off switch is so remarkable that sooner or later the more psychologically-minded cannot help but realize that the phrase “in love” actually means “in projection”— an illusion produced by the intensely creative power of our own needs, hopes and expectations.

For the Doris Lessing character this discovery came as a shock. Or it may steal in gradually, as the initial magical state of complete immersion in the other fades to the day-to-day reality of two very different people “trying to get along.” If the relationship

weathers our disappointment, then we usually describe the reason we stayed together as “we love each other.”

But what does this really mean? As the song says, “What is this thing called love?”

It seems that we all experience “love” as the greatest value in human life, what we long for and can never get enough of. And of course, on a more exalted level, all religions speak of Love as the underlying reality of God.

But I have noticed that, here on Earth, “once the honeymoon is over” then “I love you” segues into something much more prosaic.

Our lives are now joined. Children, mortgages, money, work struggles, our different dreams — all clamor for attention. We cope with various addictions and insecurities. How we move together through the constant interruptions, complexities and difficulties of sheer dailiness says a lot about our willingness to lay down personal agendas and blend with our partner to forge a common life. Some do this more easily than others, and not necessarily because they are more “loving.” Each of us comes in with a unique, original nature, with some more suited to the adjustments that partnership requires.

In the 20th century, up through the 1950s we could pretty much take for granted male/female behavior in primary relationships as based on “roles” thought to be traditional and biological, not to mention theological: the man leads, the woman follows; the man works to provide economically for the woman whose place is in the home with their children. This thoroughly pragmatic arrangement secured stability in both family and society.

Then all hell broke loose. Starry-eyed hippies determined to bust out of all roles and bring “Love,” conceived as spontaneity and authenticity, back into the world. “Peace, love, dope” utopian idealism soon wrestled with another, equally strong trend, that of angry feminists demanding male/female power redistribution. The fallout from this

glaringly contradictory set of influences was, as we now realize, both extremely potent and decidedly mixed.

Forty years later, when we look at the psychological dynamics of most male/female relationships today, they seem to fit into one or more of the following categories:

In some relationships, one naturally leads and the other follows. In others, partners take turns, or each leads in certain areas. Or they don't. Instead, one dominates and the other obeys — or appears to. Sometimes the submissive one is actually passive/aggressive, gets what he or she wants through surreptitious means.

Any of these relationships might call themselves “loving;” I would rather describe them as, just as in the '50s, thoroughly practical: though society has relaxed its ideas as to which gender fits into which role, and though sometimes roles may overlap or reverse, the partners still play roles and still make it their main business as a couple to negotiate their separate needs, giving (or giving in) in exchange for getting.

In some cases, of course, one person refuses to give in, despite what the other wishes, and must then either tolerate complete subjugation, or leave. Or, the two compete for dominance. Though these kinds of unions usually end badly, others seem to live for the struggle and are addicted to drama.

Like me. I needed total control, so I had to fall and gnash my teeth over and over again in subtle or blatant battles with lovers. And when I wasn't embattled I was licking my wounds, obsessing on what went wrong and how to make it right again. Like a lightning bolt streaking in slow motion through time, my life jerked between exalted highs and despairing lows. I identified aliveness with intensity.

Loss

Now, after more than forty years of relationship experience as an adult, I would say that the crucial test of what we glibly call “love” comes when we endure some kind of sustained loss. When the beloved dies or leaves or betrays us, reveals him- or herself to be utterly “Other,” not at all what we had imagined in our “in love” phase. Or, for those like Doris Lessing’s character who live at a more self-aware level, when we realize that the qualities we had ascribed to our lover were actually projections of our own unconscious needs. In either case, our discovery hurls us from the heights of “love” into the abyss. We slog through bewilderment, abandonment, disillusionment, grief.

But then what?

How do we respond to our suffering?

When in pain, it is natural for warm-blooded critters to shut down, curl into a fetal position, and wait to either die or get better. Our gut instinct is to close our hearts and build a defensive wall against further hurt.

Shut down, armored against our agony, there seem to be three alternative ways to proceed: we “make do” with our situation, though cynical, with greatly diminished expectations; we engage in a campaign to try to change the other; or, we leave, and quickly or eventually cast about for another with whom to enter the same song and dance.

The first choice drops us into the land of the living dead. Since we have squelched our life force, nothing new can happen. The hardening of our heart accelerates the march towards death of the physical body and meanwhile, we cannot help but leak or spew negativity, contaminating our environment.

The second choice is the one I have jumped into, time after time, though I've long known better. And of course, it never works, just creates polarity and conflict as the Other fights for his own life. All along, this choice is fraught with delusion: I inflate, seeing what I do as "helping" or "serving," and so feel heroic; then, when the Other refuses, I deflate into victimization and martyrhood, not to mention frustration, resentment, bitterness, depression.

More rarely, we take this mode to the extreme — turn violent, try to force the other, dominate, or, if necessary, crush the Other.

The third alternative, "cut and run," is more often the man's choice. Women are likely to try the second alternative — for *years* — always with the hope that "if I love him enough, he will learn to love me." Finally, conceding defeat, but still assuming the grass is always greener, we leave one partner, blame him for what went wrong, re-enter the hunt and wonder why the next partner resembles the first!

A Fourth Alternative

In the past few years I have discovered a fourth alternative. And that is to remain open and vulnerable — no matter what, no matter how much it hurts. In fact, I have discovered that if I do what seems counter-intuitive at the time, if I truly *surrender* to the pain of loss, then it is as if I come upon a secret door that I did not even know existed. And this door, I soon realize, opens into a room filled with what I have been seeking all along: love's gold, love's treasure.

What I suggest here may sound both absurd (who wants to be a masochist?) and absurdly simple (it can't be that easy!) — but don't get me wrong. Though it may seem stupid and simplistic to ordinary consciousness, in my experience such surrender is extremely difficult in practice. Not only my instincts, but the conditioning of my entire life militates against it.

To intentionally touch into my own terrible emotional wound defies both instinct and common-sense.

I do it anyway.

In this exercise, I deliberately and voluntarily move awareness into the place in my body where the pain is centered. In my 40s, I would feel as if someone had kicked me in the solar plexus with a boot; in my 60s, I feel pain more in my heart, as if an elephant stands on my chest.

Now I can look upon the difference between the two locations and note my own progress. For my center of gravity does seem to have shifted from the solar plexus chakra (the power center, where I learn the limits of my own power) to the heart chakra (where I allow the heart to open and attune to others with no expectations).

Up through my 40s, whenever emotional/physical pain threatened to take me under I would instantly cathect into my mind, my ego — and stay there — so that I would *not* double up in agony, *not* stay in bed all day. Desperately, my ego mind would make up ideas as to why I was feeling so terrible and dwell *there* — on someone in the outside or inside world (present, past, or imagined future) who had “caused” me to recoil. My obsession with the Other as cause of my pain was an unconscious attempt to distract me from my body’s painful feelings and served to justify them so that I could feel better, or superior, to the Other.

Like everyone else in a culture inherited from Rene Descartes who coined the phrase “I think, therefore I am,” and who labeled the body a machine, completely separate from the mind, my mind was me and my body an inconvenient encumbrance that I had to drag along behind.

This process, of reflexively slipping out of my body into my mind, continues. Patterns, imprinted from birth, cling.

And yet, strong as this pattern is, from my early 20s on I have also felt intermittently driven by a very strong conscious need to let it go.

Self-Remembering

As a young wife and mother in a life in which I felt increasingly trapped, forlorn and desperate, I would take long daily walks, bumping the stroller down cobblestone streets to Harvard Square on a quest, but for what, what? Then came the life-changing day in which the proverbial book fell off the shelf into my hand, opened to a page in which its author, Immanuel Ouspensky, a disciple of the Russian mystic and mathematician Gurdjieff, threw down the gauntlet that ignited my inner fire.

Most humans, he said, have no free will. Rather than being awake, we sleep-walk through life as mechanical beings, caught in a vicious round of conditioned patterns. We think we make conscious choices, when actually we react automatically to inside or outside stimuli.

Those who do have free will, he claimed, are very, very rare, since free will is a difficult accomplishment that takes many years. Ouspensky said that in order to even begin to develop free will, Gurdjieff advocated a practice called “self-remembering.”

Even at that early age I recognized instantly that he was right, I was clicking through my life like a robot. Yet to actually face the fact that I was unconsciously being pulled by strings over which I had no control infuriated me. I decided to get a grip on myself. To develop my own free will. To “wake up.”

In order to begin to interrupt unconscious patterns of behavior I instructed myself to be able to stop in the midst of any activity and say “I’m here!” Simply that. “I am here.” So, while brushing my teeth, or changing my child’s diapers, or walking down the street, or writing a paper, I began to practice this method of suddenly stopping whatever I was doing simply to acknowledge my own presence in the midst of the buzzing

confusion of my life with husband, children, graduate school in philosophy, and, of course, my hyperactive, judging, chattering brain.

It was not long before I found myself astonished to discover that self-remembering actually worked, that it did help me to “wake up” — momentarily; but then, like an automaton, I would slip back into oblivion. Intuitively, I knew that only if I learned how to consistently “wake up” as if out of a dream in the middle of any point in my day, and then eventually, to actually stay awake during any and all circumstances, no matter how dire or exciting, would I be able to take full charge of my life.

I can look back now and say that an enormous gulf separates the capacity to wake up momentarily and the infinitely more difficult goal of being able to hold a larger awareness over time. Luckily, I didn’t know that then, or I might have grown discouraged.

Though I didn’t realize it then, “self-remembering” was my initiation into the practice of conscious awareness. Awareness is the holy grail, always on the horizon, luring me on. Forty years later, I’m still on automatic much of the time, and yet more and more I can stay awake for minutes, even hours. More rarely, most of a whole day. At this point I wake up (and fall back) hundreds of times each day, as monkey mind once again lures me into its seductive snares. Little by little I stitch together those moments of awareness so that the current of the flow becomes (almost!) continuous — an exquisitely alive sense of being here, right here, right now, in this body, at this time, in these surroundings, all senses attuned, at one with the whole.

And each time I do, everything changes. I find myself awake and aware, steady and serene in the midst of the daily flux.

Conscious Suffering

By the time I reached my 40s, it was easy for me to wake up momentarily; but I could not stay awake, since I had not yet learned to move awareness into the body. As a typical Cartesian, I had been conditioned to despise my body and force it to obey my will. So learning how to deliberately move my mind into my body has been a huge deal.

Of course what shoots us out of our bodies in the first place is our experience of pain. From the time we are tiny we are admonished: “don’t cry, be brave.” We gradually learn to suppress the tears and howls of our natural response to pain so that we may “fit” into society.

In the past few years, in order to undo all this conditioning, in order to move into my own pain and stay there, I now attempt to catch my mind at the instant it tries to take over with “reasons” for why I feel so bad. Each time, to notice justifications as they arise and let them go. Let the ideas go, whatever they are, true or false, right or wrong, doesn’t matter. What matters is that I climb down under my mind and surrender to the feelings that have been triggered once again, by some situation in the outer or inner world that has re-stimulated an old, original, childhood(?) wound.

Whatever the original wound is, doesn’t matter either. Causes upon cause, an infinity of causes! Perhaps there is no root cause, just simply the suffering that attends incarnation. In any case, as incorporated beings we humans are conditioned to develop minds that separate out from our bodies and try to squash, or squeeze or stuff them into some kind of shape that meets with the mind’s (and the culture’s) version of what the body is supposed to feel and to look like.

Conscious Suffering and Presence

This second, more advanced stage of the practice of “waking up,” that of conscious suffering, of deliberately and intentionally centering awareness directly into the place in my body that corresponds to my emotional pain — opens another door to the unexpected. Rather than intensify suffering, such focused awareness of suffering sooner or later disperses it to the point where it disappears inside a further heart-opening into what I can only describe as an all-pervasive Presence that steals in as a calm, detached, but joyfully alive awareness lying just below all my judgments and resentments and woundedness — and in fact all the mind-stuff that I then no longer need to rely on!

As a result of this practice, my need for intense drama in relationship has mutated into a near-continuous feeling of immense gratitude. Such a privilege — to be alive in a body on this beautiful earth at this critical time in history! Gratitude is continually fueled by periodic experiences of consciously allowing in the suffering that attends loss, for the practice of awareness has begun to drop me into this larger reality on a more regular and extended basis. The awareness of Presence — of the all-pervasive Love that unites and breathes through all creation — may be what mystics have hinted at for centuries.

As I continue to open further, the realization dawns that unlike “being in love,” the big Love does not require another person as its “object.” Rather, I am immersed in an ocean of Love that has no beginning and no end and includes us all as aspects of its singular Being. And Love is a fountain, it fuels my every move, showers blessings on one and all.

Presence in Relationship

I imagine that this experience of Presence is similar to the experience of those in a committed relationship where, when they disagree, both partners surrender their personal wills. Time after time, they dare to release control and jump, blindfolded and holding hands, into the void. These refined humans realize that their relationship itself is a third entity, a real energetic substance, the child or fruit of their dissolved egos. And they recognize that their relationship has needs that sometimes supersede the desires of either individual.

Surrender to relationship opens the heart — to what is, rather than what we wish it to be, to the reality of the present moment, to the Presence that undergirds us all — and requires radical trust on both individuals' parts. Both are vulnerable, since either could, if desired, trounce the other, manipulate the situation to get what they want.

The widow of one such rare couple told me that it was two years before she could let go of her own needs and attend to his, two years before, she said, the moment came when she just let go, finally, of her life-long self-centered pattern in relationship. "I remember the moment," she said, "the single moment which changed my life." I asked her if the moment came in response to him. "Yes," she replied. "Suddenly something he said made me realize that he wanted the very best for me, that he would dedicate his life to my happiness." And with his surrender, came her own. From then on, she would do anything for him to be happy. From that moment on, love was the center of their union, and when he developed a brain tumor, she dedicated herself to his needs for their final two years. "My attitude was, whatever he wanted, he got," she tells me with a smile. When he died, consciously breathing his last in her presence, their 12-year union was complete and they could let each other go.

We might call this kind of emotional/spiritual surrender to Presence in relationship an evolved form of love-making.

For those who have begun this journey into the open heart, the words “I love you” become almost irrelevant. Though an insecure partner may still want to hear those magic three words, for the other, love is a given. “Of course, I love you. Doesn’t everything I do show it?”

And yet, just as on the world stage nations still compete for dominance, so loving surrender in personal relationships still seems rare. Most of us still pursue our own agendas and trivialize the phrase “I love you” by giving it lip service. We mouth the words, while our hearts lie elsewhere.

We say “I love you,” to convince ourselves, or to satisfy the other’s need or demand for reassurance. “I love you” turns into shorthand for “we’re still together, don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.” And this remark can mask the desolation of deep denial, wherein fear of loss trumps our secret resentment of the one we pretend to still “love.”

From my observations, and from my one experience with a relatively long-term relationship, I suspect that even the most conscious committed relationships are based at least in part on a sometimes little-noticed and habitual co-dependency that deftly and subtly worms its way into the interstices of daily life. For example, I recently had lunch with a friend who is going through a quite-uncharacteristic hard time. She tells me that her companion of thirty years has been “great,” but that he “hates it when I become vulnerable.” I sensed that she viewed this as evidence of his love, and could not resist the remark: “That’s because he’s the one that’s used to being vulnerable, with you as his mother. It scares him when his mother leaves.” She looked at me in amazement. Far from taking offense, it was as if I had struck a match in the cave of her mind.

And what is long-term co-dependency but a stabilized form of projection, a remnant of, a left-over crystallization from, the “in love” phase?

Knights on White Horses

When I was a child, our common human longing took mythical form that girls in my generation translated literally: the “knight on the white horse,” the “one and only” soul-mate who would whisk us away from ordinary life to “life happily ever after.”

We set ourselves up for disappointment. And, as ever, personal crises, when collectively enacted, describe cultural shifts.

In the past fifty years, as more and more marriages break and new ones form, as some people live together without marriage and others remain single, either in solitude or to “play the field,” the more metaphysical among us have begun to speak of “soul-mates,” a whole tribe of beings that we “came in with,” any number of whom can serve as karmic-mates at different points on our individual journeys.

Despite the blare of corporate, national, tribal and media wars, on a more personal level our way of considering relationships seems to be growing more relaxed and inclusive, less polarized. Now, at holiday tables, extended families reach beyond blood-ties to include former lovers, husbands, in-laws and step-children. Clint Eastwood’s two celebrated war movies, back to back, empathize with first American, then Japanese experiences at Iwo Jima in World War II. Many of us are as concerned with Iraqi casualties as we are with American ones, and Benetton’s colors not only advertise fashion, but also the beauty in ethnic variation.

From our growing acceptance of inclusion, it is only a short step to realize that, special and unique as our love for one special and unique Other may feel to us at the time, this state of being is actually a first step into an extended transition zone that links the surface phenomenon of “being in love” to the transcendent heights and immanent depths of cosmic Love.

Most of us have had experience of the first kind of love — the “puppy love” of projection. Far fewer experience a long-term relationship that helps each partner efface

the membrane that divides her or him from the universe. And those individuals who actually do evolve into the greater Love that requires no object, but shines from the inside out, equally, over all — Jesus, Buddha, Gandhi — though so rare as to seem iconic, are actually way-showers for the Oneness into which I sense we are all, sooner or later, destined to enter.

Divine Love

Various philosophers and spiritual teachers speak of “Love” as the most powerful force known, the glue that holds the universe together, the substratum of all imaginings, all daily events; “Love” as constant, serene, joyful generosity, the deep oceanic depths below the surface currents of desire and suffering.

I doubt that when we say we “love” someone, we usually refer to this sacred numinous reality. Because if we did truly have the capacity to enter the divinity of Love, why would we remain with one person rather than another?

Both Gandhi and Buddha left their wives behind in their quest for the larger Love. And if the Magdalene was the wife of Jesus, she wasn’t an acknowledged part of his mission to spread Love to all humankind. Presumably, once we have opened our hearts to the larger all-pervasive power of Love, we remain open and loving, no matter who our companion. Like saints and avatars, we love all equally.

Embodied Love

So this, for me, brings up a question. As one who does seem to have integrated at least my former projections, now what? Is a personal relationship possible or necessary? Or do I turn my gaze to the stars.

And yet, I am an embodied being. As long as I work in time and space, my intimate relations with others are limited, or seemingly limited, to one at a time. I imagine it would be easier to channel divine Love through the sexual/sensual/spiritual connection with a single Other whom I have learned, over time, to trust. I would have left the preliminaries behind, no longer slogging through the projection stage with a series of possible partners. Instead, like the rare couple mentioned above, I would have magnetized one with whom, in a single moment of grace, each of us would drop our selfishness and dedicate our lives to the other's welfare. Together, we would weather the hard stuff.

And it would all be worth it! For on the other side of that hard stuff would come the mystical payoff: our interpersonal interaction would serve as a conduit through which divine love channels into the world.

At this point, I speak theoretically, since I have never had the experience that I point to above, at least in this life. But I do sense its reality. Just as I sensed the possibility of internal integration before it was gifted to me, also like grace. And I do sense that sexual/sensual/spiritual union with the Other might be the surest access into Oneness, since sexual lovemaking is its physical expression, the *petit mort* wherein we momentarily die to ourselves and are transported into a larger universe. But of course, it doesn't last. Ecstasy fades, and we fall back, wrapped in separate skin and bone scaffolding.

Towards the One

In recent years, I have noticed that my relationships of whatever kind — even the split second, consciously enacted, deep eye-to-eye with a stranger as we pass by on the street — can startle me to the point of dissolving that seeming separation. And if this is so, then physical love-making, though it symbolizes Oneness, is not necessary. Ultimately not even personal, one-to-one connections with others are necessary, since

on an interior level, we are all connected, and always have been. The meditative solitary awareness of the monk in a cave expands to include all sentient beings.

I now view any surrender in relationship, large or small, momentary or extended, as grist for the divine mill. Each time I let go of my own personal will, I am invited to further efface the membrane that separates me from others, and enter the abiding presence.

I sense that, though we tend to think that what holds a long-term monogamous relationship together beyond the honeymoon phase, beyond the child-rearing phase, beyond and within any particular phase, is on an outer level, some combination of economics, tradition, security, shared interests and companionship, on an inner level, the level of the Real, of the One what holds a relationship together may be quite different: this universal soul-longing for reunion with the all-pervading essence of life.

And, from this higher point of view, our universal fascination with the magnetic projection of “falling in love” and “being in love” may be but symptom and symbol of the mystical oceanic Love that shimmers through space and melts all forms into Oneness.

Conclusion

Most of us think of our love for our long-term mates as “special and unique.” Instead, it may behoove us to see both our dance with the other and our eventual loss of the other as an extended transition zone. At first, we experience mere flashes, then, if we are fortunate and grace descends, longer and periods when we do actually surrender to the actual suchness of our beloved, no matter who he is, nor how much the Other disappointed or infuriated us in the days when had expectations of who he or she should be.

No expectations. Not even as to whether our Beloved will stay or go. For though our bodies and minds suffer the pain of letting go, our spirits ultimately soar. As we practice surrender in love and to Love over and over again, we begin to become aware of the larger Presence that holds the universe together.

The key seems to be to recognize that our emotional state in relationship with “a certain someone,” though at the time important and special and wonderful and/or terrible, on another level is merely the latest trigger for the Love that resides inside us always and the discovery of which is the larger purpose for which we are born. It appears that no matter what specific dramas we choose to enact, the direction is always towards the eventual full activation of this greatest of all powers.

I end with selections from two poems of the Sufi poet, Rumi:

I am so small I can barely be seen.

How can this great love be inside me?

Look at your eyes, they are small but they

see enormous things.

Gamble everything for love . . . Don't wait any longer. Silent, absent, walking an empty road, all praise.

