

TRANSCENDENT LOVE

METAPHORS OF LOVE

Now and again I so enjoy putting a sermon together, I can hardly stand it. This is one of those sermons. Its theme is LOVE, not only one of the centering concerns of all religions, but also a preoccupation of civilization from time immemorial.

I've written plenty of sermons about love through the years exploring a variety of perspectives. Early on in my career I offered a predictable sermon or two drawing from various categories of love using the traditional Christian categories learned in seminary, such as erotic love--*eros*, or brotherly love—*philia*, or self-sacrificing love—*agape*. I've mined our Universalist tradition's liberal and freeing theological assertion that "God is Love." I've spun sermons on Unconditional Love for Mother's Day. I've returned time and again to the great analysis of Love by the 20th century psychologist Erich Fromm, whose book the *Art of Loving* is a classic, in my estimation a definitive narrative of the social and psychological dimensions of Love in the modern era. In more recent years I've turned to the insights of neuroscience in mapping the brain *in* Love, asserting that Love derives from mammalian bonding instincts and resides in the limbic (mammalian) brain.

I've collected hundreds of poems that touch on various aspects of Love, some sacred but most profane(secular) offerings. Some of those selections I included in a recent (2006) quote collection on Love and Marriage titled *We Pledge our Hearts*.

I've officiated over hundreds of wedding ceremonies, in the process listening to the testimonies of couples in Love and in turn counseling them about the vicissitudes of Love. I have sagely intoned to smitten couples Anne Morrow Lindberg's cautionary advice: "When you love someone you do not love them all the time, in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth, in fluidity - in freedom, in the sense that the dancers are free, barely touching as they pass, but partners in the same pattern."

I've written meditations on Love, my favorite inspired by the lost generation British poet Rupert Brooke, "The Great Lover:"

"Love is a flame: —we have beaconed the world's night.
A city:—and we built it, these and I.
An emperor: —we have taught the world to die."

This meditation of mine speaks to an ongoing aspiration:

A quarter of a century ago I first aspired to make Brooke's words, "say, 'He loved,'" my epitaph.

No other poem has had such an enduring effect. I had an intuition that to love, more and more, would save me and satisfy me as no other attribute might.

To love more things, more often heightens perceptions, broadens appreciations, deepens connections, set frees empathy.

Loving — seized by and yielding to the quality of a person or thing that is beautiful, good, or true — is a signature of humanity. The more we love, the more we encounter that part of the human condition that is divine: Eternal!

To the extent I actively love I am free from the limitations of ego self.

Let me be remembered not so much for what I have loved, rather let me be remembered for my growing capacity to love freely and purely.

Say of me someday, "He loved, too!"

So for more than thirty years, now and again, I've looked at Love and spoke about it from a variety of perspectives as a religious phenomenon relative to the meaning and purpose of the human condition. You might think I'd have tired about Love as a sermon theme.

What excites me now is a whole new way of getting at Love, not from poetry and theology, but from science that leads me to a thoroughly natural understanding of Love.

THE SCIENCE OF LOVE

It's appropriate during this week of the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth to take a scientific look at Love. More and more we realize that we live in a post-Darwinian world. Darwin's theory of evolution, particularly the notion of natural selection, is embedded in our bodies through our genes, revealing patterns of behavior that cluster in what we now call social biology. Our biology and our social biology are now revealing Love's origins.

A leading researcher/writer on the Science of Love is Helen Fisher. An evolutionary anthropologist by training, Dr. Fisher has spent her career writing on the biology of Love. A recent book, *Why We Love: the Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* (2004) is a handy resource, not only on up to date findings about science's take on Love, but it's also spiced with helpful advice.

Dr. Fisher presents three levels of Love that she and her colleagues have mapped that function in certain areas of the brain through the agency of brain chemicals. The first is *sexual desire* or *lust*, the second is *romantic love*, and the third is *attachment* or *bonding*. Taken together these three progressing levels make sense: Lust causes one to search the

population for a mate. Romantic Love causes one to connect physically and emotionally with one other person. And Attachment keeps the couple in relationship for the length of time necessary to raise a child. In the simplest sense this is the network of Reproduction.

Dr. Fisher's research for this book involved brain imaging of college students who claimed to be in the first few weeks of being in love. The subjects of the study were shown a photograph of their beloved while an MRI machine scanned their brains. Then their brains were "cleared" by having the subjects count backwards by seven from an arbitrary number. Next the subjects were shown a photograph of a neutral acquaintance. The images that resulted detected blood flow in the brain, a symptom of neural activity.

Dr. Fisher and her team found activity in certain areas of the brain, hot spots that are part of a circuit that is dense in cells that produce or receive the brain chemical dopamine. (This circuit relates to wanting or anticipating a reward.) Another area, shaped something like a medium sized shrimp and residing on one side of the brain, releases the brain chemical norepinephrine to incite passionate love. Yet another similarly shaped and sized area, on the opposite side of the brain from the passion zone, registers physical attractiveness, as well as related longing, desire, and that compulsive neural itch to be physically and emotionally connected with another. All of this is occurring in the so-called mammalian brain. A surge of dopamine and norepinephrine with a reduction of serotonin are the primary ingredients of a cocktail that produce a Romantic Love state of mind: elated, infatuated, craving, obsessive, focused, passionate, ruptured.... New love can seem almost like a mental illness—mania, dementia, and obsession rolled into one state.

In love-making and orgasm other chemicals are triggered including oxytocin in women and vasopressin in men that promote bonding or attachment. (Oxytocin is the biochemical that bonds Mother to Infant.) Curiously seminal fluid has dopamine and norepinephrine in it as well as serotonin, testosterone, and estrogen--a mixture of chemicals that stimulates bonding and also has an antidepressant effect.

It is clear, and it will become clearer as research advances, Romantic Love as a literal state of mind, is being reduced to a biochemical chain of events triggered in the brain.

TRANSCENDENT LOVE

Yet, I recommend that this reductionist vision of Love is not an end place, rather it is a starting place for those who seek to explore transcendent aspects of the human condition.

Regarding the transcendent nature of Love, David Buss, a psychologist from the University of Texas and author of the book *The Evolution of Desire*, said:

"I've spent two decades of my professional life studying human mating. In that time, I've documented phenomena ranging from what men and women desire in a mate to the most diabolical forms of sexual treachery. I've discovered the astonishingly creative ways in which men and women deceive and manipulate each other. I've studied mate poachers,

obsessed stalkers, sexual predators, and spouse murderers. But throughout this exploration of the dark dimensions of human mating, I've remained unwavering in my belief in true love.

"While love is common, true love is rare, and I believe that few people are fortunate enough to experience it. The roads of regular love are well traveled and their markers are well understood by many—the mesmerizing attraction, the ideational obsession, the sexual afterglow, profound self-sacrifice, and the desire to combine DNA. But true love takes its own course through uncharted territory. It knows no fences, has no barriers or boundaries. It's difficult to define, eludes modern measurement, and seems scientifically woolly. But I know true love exists. I just can't prove it."

True love is a good phrase to begin to explore the transcendent dimension of the complex of brain chemistry that I've been sketching. Through imagination, intuition, and empathy love seeps into our seeing and knowing. Time and again, across the ages, we experience love in multiple dimensions; and it is a primary source of meaning in our lives/world. We speak of it in terms of a golden rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." We intone Love's primacy in religion: "Faith, hope, love abide; these three. But the greatest of these is love." And there any number of ancient and modern meditations on love,—poems, essays, books,—such as the following by Anne Morrow Lindberg: "Love is a force in you that enables you to give other things. It is the motivating power. It enables you to give strength and freedom and peace to another person. It is not a result; it is a cause. It is not a product; it produces. It is a power, like steam or electricity. It is valueless unless you can give something else by means of it."

I want to sketch, just a little, the transcendent nature of Love as I imagine it.

The seat of Love is the brain, an evolutionary marvel that can be effectively conceptualized in three aspects: First the ancient reptilian brain with its autonomic activities; then the mammalian (limbic) brain; and third the neocortex where thinking and other so-called higher function emanate. Together these areas work together, through the alchemy of brain chemicals and electrical circuits (neural pathways) to create consciousness and self-consciousness. In the process of instinct and experience we invariably transform "mere" physical/emotional Love of brain chemistry into the metaphors of "transcendent or true love" that give our lives and world layers of meaning: heaped upon meaning, heaped upon meaning, heaped upon meaning....

It is clearly our nature to first, biologically Love and then to make metaphors of Love that give meaning to our lives and world. I believe the religious dimension of the human condition is also the meaning making dimension. It's totally understandable why Love marks so many of the world religions.

I suspect that the when we know any sort of Transcendent Love our thoughts are flowing along familiar and pleasurable neural pathways while inciting centers associated with biological Love. There is a direct correspondence between biochemical Love of brain chemistry and transcendent Love of the brains's consciousness. Nature has implanted

Love in us and the miracle of our mind (conscious/self-conscious) projects Love onto our world, thereby creating many nuanced forms of Love.

This is a natural miracle, a natural miracle that happens for each of us.

My colleague Dick Gilbert wrote a brief meditation that is a fitting end for these remarks intimating how a “merely” biochemical Love in the brain transforms into the ideals of Transcendent Love that give our lives and our world meaning:

We are, therefore, we love.
Cosmic bits of energy
Come to life together.
We love, therefore, we are.
May we be humbled before the wonder
Of what we dare to create.