

WHERE THE LOVE COMES FROM

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All Souls NYC

As most of you know from my announcement last week, there are two little creatures slowly turning into babies in my womb. It's an incredible process – especially incredible because I don't really have to do anything to make it happen. They're growing eyeballs while I'm in the checkout line at grocery store. They already have fingers and spines and brains and I really had nothing to do with it. I know it's the most natural thing in the world, but it seems like science fiction to me. This summer two humans are going to pop out of me? Come on, get real!

At this phase, my pregnancy feels more like a condition that I have than anything else. And when I ask myself how I feel about these two beings, I have to admit that, although I feel quite attached to them and I would be devastated if anything were to go wrong, I don't actually love them yet. And yet, I'm quite sure that sometime between now and when they're born, I will start to love them very much. Love that isn't here now will be here six months from now. That love will not be relocated from somewhere else in my life; I don't think I'll love anyone else any less. It will be new love that will materialize out of thin air. How can that be? How and where will it come from?

You could say that, well, it comes from evolution. The love that parents feel for their children creates an evolutionary advantage for that family. When a baby is born, hormones fire in the parents' brains (and actually fathers often have hormonal changes too when their baby is born), the emotion of love wells up, and so the parents care for the child. If a parent didn't have those feelings, he or she would never be willing to do all the work it takes to keep an infant alive and healthy. So you could say love comes from chemicals that help the species survive.

But you know and I know that that's not a complete or satisfying answer. It's no more satisfying than saying that my babies, when they're born, will be merely the sum total of some genetic data plus the food I ate. That's the scientific explanation, and on one level it's true, but we know that they will be more than that – other than that – somehow greater than the sum of their physical parts. They will eventually have consciousness and opinions and they themselves will have the capacity to love.

There is a gap between what science can explain and what we know to be true about love. There's a gap between the chemical mechanisms of love and our lived experience of it. When people say, "God is love," I think this is what they're talking about – a sense of the mysterious power that bridges that gap; that makes possible that ineffable phenomenon that all of us know but that none of us can fully define. This makes sense to me as an understanding of God.

When I say that it's something "we all know," I don't mean that we all have experienced romantic love or parenthood. But I believe that we all have the capacity for love; we all have an intuition about what love is and what it would feel like if we felt it and what we would lose if we lost it.

Artists try to get at ways of describing this love – pop culture and fine artists – Hollywood, Shakespeare, Valentine's Day advertisements. Our culture celebrates this kind of love that sweeps you off your feet. This is also the kind of love that causes us tremendous pain when the object of our love doesn't love us back, whether it's temporarily our teenager or our spouse or lover. The novelist Neil Gaiman wrote about this in his blog:

Have you ever been in **love**? Horrible isn't it? It makes you so vulnerable. It opens your chest and it opens up your heart and it means that someone can get inside you and mess you up. You build up all these defenses, you build up a whole suit of armor, so that nothing can hurt you, then one stupid person, no different from any other stupid person, wanders into your stupid life...You give them a piece of you. They didn't ask for it. They did something dumb one day, like kiss you or smile at you, and then your life isn't your own anymore. **Love** takes hostages. It gets inside you. It eats

you out and leaves you crying in the darkness, so a simple phrase like 'maybe we should be just friends' turns into a glass splinter working its way into your heart. It hurts. Not just in the imagination. Not just in the mind. It's a soul-hurt, a real gets-inside-you-and-rips-you-apart pain. I hate **love**.

Most of us have loved someone in our lives, whether it is a parent, a sibling, a friend, a partner, a child, or an animal. And each of these kinds of love is just as mysterious in its origin as the love that I will eventually feel for my children. It comes from nowhere or it comes from God, however you prefer to think of it.

But if this is the case, if love is a just an emotion that emerges spontaneously and mysteriously, that we have no control over, that accosts us unbidden and uncreated by us, then how can religious traditions *command* us to love? What can it mean to be commanded to love if love is something that happens *to* you? What can it mean for Jesus to say that the most important commandment is to love the Lord your God? What can it mean for Rabbi Hillel to say that if you want to boil down the whole Torah to a statement that can be recited while standing on one foot, it is the command to love your neighbor as yourself? How can one be commanded to feel something?

It seems that the kind of love that these spiritual teachers are talking about is not a feeling that happens *to* you but rather something in which you actively participate. Loving your neighbor must mean acting in a loving way toward your neighbor, and loving God must mean performing acts of devotion to God or to God's creatures. The teaching from these traditions is that love is not just a Hollywood Valentine's Day feeling that we passively experience or receive; love is something we *do*.

This is the ethic we heard expressed in the *Fiddler on the Roof* dialogue that Miles and Marilyn performed for us earlier. Tevye has learned from his daughter about this newfangled, modern idea of romantic love and he wants to know whether his wife Golde feels that love for him. The question doesn't even compute for her. For her, love is all of the loving things she has done for him over their twenty-five years of marriage. Those acts *constitute* her love for him. And their actions toward each other constitute their relationship.

I think that's true of all of us. Our relationships are constituted by our actions toward each other, not by how we feel. Those actions can be words that we say or don't say to each other, things we do or don't do for each other, the ways we touch or look at each other, what we give up or don't give up for each other. These are the things that determine whether love is real or just theoretical.

Often, in fact, actions and relationships come first and feelings follow. We typically think that we do nice things for people because we love them. But I think it often works the other way around— we come to love the people and things in which we invest our time and energy and attention. This is the concept behind arranged marriage and this was the conclusion implied in the *Fiddler on the Roof* scene – Tevye says, “Then, you love me?” and Golde replies, “I suppose I do.” Tevye says, “I suppose I love you too.” And they both agree that the recognition of these feelings doesn't change anything, but that it's nice to know. The core of their relationship remains what they do for each other, not what they feel.

That seems like a harsh thing to say, basically that feelings don't count, it's only what you do that counts. But I wouldn't say that feelings don't count at all, I would just say that feelings aren't enough. Love only manifests and becomes three dimensional in active relationship. Love has to exist somewhere outside of your own head to become real. This is why infatuation with a movie star is not real love – there is no relationship there with another actual being, only with an idea. And this is also why I don't feel real love for my fetuses yet. They are not “other” to me yet; they are still very much a part of my body, not separate from me. There is no relationship there with other actual beings, only with an idea.

The kind of love that Valentine's Day and Hollywood celebrate, that mysterious love that arrives in your heart for your baby or for a man or woman you've just met or an animal you rescue from a shelter – that feeling of love is a free gift from the universe. It serves an evolutionary function and it can be delicious and even sublime. But it's just an hors d'oeuvre. It gives us a taste of what it can mean to be in relationship with another. But it is not meant to be the whole meal. To love fully, we need to go beyond the feelings, stick

with it when the feelings come and go. True love is the decision to act lovingly, over and over again, even when we don't feel like it. It's a commitment to know the other as he or she changes and grows. It's an entire way of life.

It's hard to do. It's not romantic or sexy. The poet Robert Hayden called it "love's austere and lonely offices." Sometimes the people closest to us are the very people with whom it is hardest to act lovingly. They push our buttons; they make us crazy. Our partners remind us too much of our parents. Our kids remind us of things we don't like about ourselves. Our parents need us to take care of them when we want them to take care of us. Our friends change in ways we don't like. Sometimes we feel betrayed by that feeling of initial infatuation – like we were tricked – when the hard reality of being in relationship strikes; when we have to shovel snow and change diapers and work to get food on the table; when we have to listen and compromise and give things up. We learn that the person whom we love is imperfect and to love someone imperfect must mean that we too are imperfect. The ideal dissolves – the ideal of who he or she is and therefore the ideal of who we are.

This is the kind of love that Valentine's Day forgets. But in forgetting this kind of love, Valentine's Day forgets kind of love that literally makes life worth living. It's the kind of love that gives meaning to our work and cements our families and communities together. It gives us the wonder of constant discovery of our loved ones and constant discovery of ourselves. I imagine that the love I will feel for my babies when they are born will be only deepened and strengthened in the years of acting lovingly toward them and getting to know them as people.

And so if you believe that God is love or that God commands us to love, remember that this means the magical kind of love and the hard work kind of love too. Not just the hors d'oeuvres but the whole enchilada. If you can open yourself to the full meal, you open yourself to your full humanity. You engage in the full beauty and richness of being in relationship with others. This openness and this commitment is where the love comes from. Happy Valentine's Day and happy loving.