IN DEFENSE OF LOVE

A Meditative Essay on the Philosophy of Love

“Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos . . . Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied.”

— Carl Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (95)

In Western societies, we champion the individual. Individualism emphasizes the importance of personal freedom and self-reliance, placing the human individual at the center of society. A person’s identity is found within themselves. Because of this, the individual is vulnerable: they ultimately ascribe more
value to who they are, which can act as a basis for their sense of purpose. Arguably, our individuality is a dangerous anchor to hold onto because it is unstable; it is prone to change. Alone, the individual is untethered from a stable sense of being. They place a greater importance on their emotions and, alone, turn inward, toward their pain. Anxiety, fear, sadness, and anger are anchors the lonely individual holds onto. But too much negative emotion can hinder their ability to flourish, and today’s generation is facing this internal distress that has ultimately led to fraught relationships in need of serious re-evaluation.

Some of this instability may be based on the fact that our definitions of meaning have changed. For thousands of years, the lives of humans were driven by a fear of the unknown. Many placed their faith in God because it was their attempt at explaining the inexplicable—our sense of purpose was based in religion. But today, young people are struggling to make sense of a world that is so certain. Modern humans don’t get their cosmology, their knowledge of the universe, from the Bible or other ancient texts anymore. Science and rationality promulgate our everyday lives, but the inexplicable feeling that something is missing still lingers—this has left us spiritually uncertain. This uncertainty coupled with our hyper-individuality has led to isolation and bred negative emotion. Put simply, we are unsure about our place in the world.

The general consensus is that our mental anguish can be measured and diagnosed—it can be simply understood through science. And while drugs and therapy have certainly helped people alleviate a certain level of their suffering, a nagging sensation still remains for many. How can we remedy this affliction of the soul?

The human soul yearns for something beyond what it knows to be certain. We long for a fundamental reason to live—to be. How can we live a fulfilled, meaningful life? In the modern age, religion provides a weak sense of meaning for many people. But what is the alternative? This question has been answered by writers, poets, philosophers, and artists time and time again.
And the answer many of them have come to is love.

My fascination with the idea of love first came to me when I watched Theatre Erindale’s production of Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses*. The play stunned me and, after convincing my friends to join me, I watched it two more times. *Metamorphoses*, based on the epic poems by Ovid, dives deep into the theme of love, distinguishing several types of love based on ancient Greek mythology, such as *eros*, or sexual love, *pragma*, a practical love based on reason and one’s long-term interests, *storge*, the love a parent feels for a child, and *philautia*, a narcissistic love.

Almost all of the main characters in Zimmerman’s play go through a transformation. The inciting action to each of their metamorphoses is violence, either physical or emotional, and it is almost always tied to love: the death of a loved one, loving oneself, or longing for love. Like in the story of Alcyone and Cyex, in which Cyex, while voyaging across the sea, drowns. Alcyone’s love for Cyex is so strong that it moves the gods to transform them both into kingfishers so that they may be together (Zimmerman 29). Throughout *Metamorphoses*, love is almost always lost, only to be found again in a new form.

Love also acts as the catalyst for change in each story. Midas holds his fortune so dear to his heart that Bacchus grants him the power to turn anything he touches into solid gold. This inevitably causes Midas to turn his own daughter into gold (Zimmerman 19). His love for his daughter trumps his love for material possessions, ultimately driving him to go to the end of the earth to reverse the curse. In another story, Myrrha’s love for her father is perversely twisted (to the point of incest) by Aphrodite (Zimmerman 55), and in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus travels down into the underworld to save his wife (Zimmerman 42).

Love, to Zimmerman, is the most powerful force in the world. When inspired by love, each of us has the capacity to flourish into something greater than ourselves, but the process is often difficult. The moral of *Metamorphoses* can be found in
the story of Eros and Psyche. Eros is the god of love, and Psyche represents the soul. As one of the Laundress’ says, “The soul wanders in the dark until it finds love. So, wherever love goes, there we find our soul” (Zimmerman 76). The soul finds peace in love.

“Let me die still loving, and so never die,” is one of the final lines of the play (Zimmerman 83). Love ultimately transcends death when it is carried on by those who have been affected by it. Love grounds the individual in a way that politics or loneliness cannot. When you say, “I love you,” you are saying many things. You are saying that you care deeply for that person. You are also saying, in a way, that you accept that person, despite their flaws. Loving someone means you want that person in your life—you find joy in their presence.

When we love, we imbue our actions with empathy and understanding. Empathy is cultivated from a young age through every human interaction we engage in. Caring about, and for, others is a staple of the human condition. We care for our partners, our parents, our kids, and our friends. We even have the capacity to care for strangers we may never meet or have only known for a moment. It’s one of our greatest defenses against what could be a cruel and violent world. We step into the shoes of another person, taking on their burdens, feeling their pain, and learning about ourselves in the process. Empathy is the catalyst for proper human connection—it allows us to recognize each other’s individuality.

After living through the horrors of the Holocaust, Austrian psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, realized that “love is the ultimate highest goal to which one can aspire” (Frankl 49). While suffering through and observing the most inhumane degradations, Frankl clung to the thought of his wife, his beloved, Eleonore. Frankl said, “The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understand how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved” (Frankl 49).
Frankl learned that love is extraordinary in its ability to do good. But love will not always come easily to an individual. They must choose it, especially when they are faced with hate. As Martin Luther King said in his sermon on loving your enemies: “Men must see that force begets force, hate begets hate, toughness begets toughness. And it is all a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for all and everybody. Somebody must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and the chain of evil in the universe. And you do that by love” (King 328). When under pressure, we may lash out in anger, or turn inward out of fear or anxiety, but those are simple responses. To love is to carry yourself with courage, and to hold all your actions to a proper ethical standard.

But love should not only be chosen in our moments of misery. Khalil Gibran saw love as something to be folded into our everyday actions and experiences. In The Prophet, he writes:

And what is it to work with love? It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth. It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house. It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit. It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit, and to know that all the blessed dead are standing about you and watching. (Gibran 32)

A person who lives in love does not live for themselves, but for others. A parent loves their child, a husband loves his wife, and a friend loves their friends. These relationships are defined by a notion of deep concern. When we love, we attempt to offer those we love the purest, most positive form of happiness—because we care. Our actions are not our own when we love because they are in the service of a greater good. “If you’re happy, I’m happy” is one of the few true statements in life. It is all the more true when one is in love.
And we can’t forget about one of the greatest forms of love—that which is found between two friends. The Greek word for it is *philia*, often translated as “brotherly love.” There is no intrinsic need for friendship. Without companionship we would still survive, but friendship adds colour to our lives. We make a conscious effort to spend time with others because we understand the benefits their presence may provide. A friend holds up a mirror to your soul. They reflect the goodness they find in your heart, and lovingly reveal the parts of you that need to be refined.

Ultimately, love goes beyond the mere connection between individuals. In his meditation on the role of the poet, Gibran alludes to the unseen bond that connects us all together, saying “I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are sons of one religion, and it is the spirit” (Gibran 48).

Behind these various forms of love is *agape*, an “overflowing love” as Martin Luther King put it. It is the “understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill of all men” that seeks nothing in return (King 319). It is a universal, unconditional love that endlessly inspires one to do better and become more than what they are. It is the love that all other loves merge into. It is the love that theologians would call the “love of God.” To love with *agape* is to strive optimistically toward a general betterment of life. This can be done in many different ways: how you conduct yourself in personal relationships, how you improve your community, how you engage with others. As much as love is a feeling, it is also a state of mind.

Ultimately, the divisions that plague us are man-made. Love transcends religion, identity, country, and border. Although great art, innovation, and new definitions of meaning have arisen from these divisions, we should acknowledge what binds us together as a species.

Individuals should rejoice in their shared humanity and reach an understanding by it. A person should mold their
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actions in love, through every day and every burden of work, every relationship built, and every relationship passed on. They should let love guide them through the labours of life, just as a lighthouse guides a ship to land.

Love is the human universal. If a person directs their life with love, then maybe they won’t feel so void. Maybe they will find an answer to their lack of meaning and purpose.

One must remember that if the burden of life is too heavy to carry alone, others, too, are standing alone, and they are waiting for someone to reach out their hand in love—a hand that will be accepted by love in return.

Works Cited