



A DARE BOOKLET

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Love

Is it Worth the Hassle?

Love may make the world go round, but it can also cause heartache, headache and stomachache. Love may be all we need, but it can also be very costly, not only for our bank account but for our time, our friendships and our sanity. Love, whether we are falling in it or falling out of it, is a beautiful meadow—full of emotional landmines.

How can something that promises so much also cause so much pain? Three writers offer different models for thinking about love—and come up with surprisingly similar answers:

What is falling in love?

1. Robert Sternberg, Professor of Psychology and Education at Yale

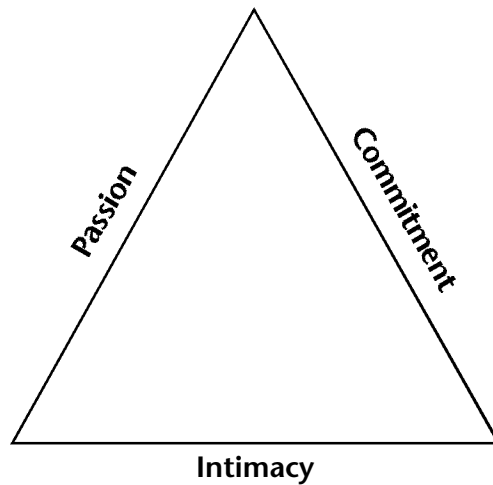


Figure 1

Sternberg suggests that the experience of love has three components (Figure 1):¹

- **Passion:** is the experience we think of as 'falling in love'. There is intense attraction to the other person, and often a powerful sexual component
- **Intimacy:** by this Sternberg means such things as sharing, understanding, support, closeness and communication
- **Commitment:** sticking with the relationship even when it's not easy.

Then he adds the fact that no one of these alone is adequate. Passion by itself is better called infatuation—and it doesn't satisfy in the long term (Figure 2). Intimacy without

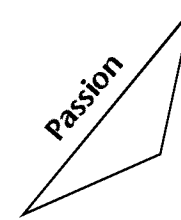


Figure 2

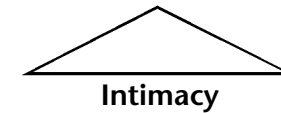


Figure 3

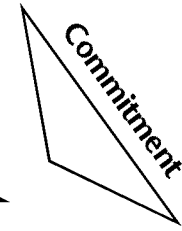


Figure 4

passion is generally what we call friendship, rather than love (Figure 3). And commitment alone, where there is no passion and no intimacy, is only a shell of either love or friendship (Figure 4).

The experience of falling in love begins with passion. It may then, with more or less speed, lead to intimacy, which may or may not lead on to commitment. The trouble is that if a relationship is fuelled primarily by passion, the fuel supply is unreliable. The relationship is unlikely to last very long unless intimacy and commitment have grown alongside passion, because they provide the staying power that enables a relationship to survive the ups and downs of passion.

2. CS Lewis, Professor of English at Oxford and later at Cambridge

Lewis's starting point for his book *The Four Loves* is the fact that ancient Greek had four words for different kinds of love, where English has only one. The four are *philia*—friendship,

storge—family affection, *agape*—undeserved love for the unloveable, and *eros*. Eros is the experience we describe as falling in love: it is basically the desire to possess another person. It includes belonging sexually, but it is more than sexual—in fact, more than any specific pleasure the other can give. It's what lies behind a lover saying to the beloved, 'I could eat you.'

But like Sternberg, Lewis sees *eros* alone as inadequate for a lasting, satisfying relationship. He suggests it needs to be disciplined by what he calls 'higher principles'. In fact, he describes the perfect marriage as *eros* plus *philia*, the experience where 'you are fortunate enough to have "fallen in love with" and married your Friend' (Lewis 64). That, of course, is the heart of the movie *Shadowlands*, which is about Lewis's marriage and how he experienced that combination in his own life.

3. Scott Peck, Psychiatrist and Author

Peck writes in his best-selling book, *The Road Less Travelled*:

The experience of falling in love is invariably temporary. No matter who we fall in love with, sooner or later we fall out of love, if the relationship continues long enough (Peck 84).

He gives a rather unflattering analogy. He points out that children under the age of one have no ego-boundaries: they make no distinctions between persons, or between themselves and others, and all their needs are met. They are everything and everyone, and they are omnipotent. In time, of course, they learn to distinguish between people, and to distinguish their own identity from that of other people; they learn the limits of their body, and the limits of their power.

Falling in love, says Peck, is really a regression to that stage of babyhood. Often lovers will say things like 'We are one!

We think totally alike. He/she is part of me. Together we can conquer the world.' They have no ego-boundaries, and a strong sense of omnipotence.

This is fine, until reality bites: he wants sex, she doesn't; she wants to talk, he doesn't; she doesn't like his friends, he doesn't like her family. Then those well-established ego-boundaries snap back again and there is trouble. The oneness which was the basis of the relationship to this point is threatened. Now there is a choice: either the relationship ends or, as Peck puts it, 'they initiate the work of real loving' (Peck 88). I'll come to his definition of 'real loving' shortly.

To summarize: why does falling in and out of love cause hassles? These writers say basically: We mistake the nature of this love. We think it is the best (or the only) kind of love, and it isn't. We think it should last forever, and it can't; it's not intended to. We think the other person is perfect, and they are not.

What then can we do?

So if you have that feeling, 'Here I go again,' what should you do? Take a cold shower? Become a nun? Not at all. Falling in love is a valid human experience. If you happen to believe in a God who made the world, falling in love is a part of God's good creation. So enjoy it for what it is, but respect it for what it is and don't try to make it into something it isn't. It is the least mature among the loves, and as with an immature child, we don't despise her because she is not older, but we encourage and nurture her growth towards maturity. How do we do that? Let's go back to that provocative phrase of Scott Peck: 'real loving'.

What is real love?

Peck defines it this way:

Love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth (Peck 81).

He focuses on the will. Falling in love requires no effort whatsoever. There is nothing to choose or decide. This kind of love chooses you. Real love however involves choices: I can live without you, but I make a choice not to. If the will is primary, then the feelings are secondary; they come and go, they are nice but they are not necessary. Did you know that you can love without feeling, and you can feel without loving? When I am at home, I take my wife tea in bed first thing in the morning. Do you think I always do that with a surge of warm emotion? No way. It is an unemotional decision of the will! That's love without feeling. Ask any father or mother how they feel about changing diapers. Do they feel a flood of attraction for their baby at that point? Probably not. They simply make a decision of the will. Love without feeling.

The phrase 'spiritual growth' suggests another reality: the other person isn't perfect, nor am I. I need to grow, the other needs to grow, and we can actually be catalysts for each other's growth. We need to nurture one another, challenge one another and encourage one another. This is not the loss of ego-boundaries of immature love; this is helping one another become fuller individuals, more the people we are capable of becoming. You will gather from Peck's use of the word 'spiritual' that he feels God has to come into this story somewhere along the line. I'll explain why in a minute.

We started by talking about the hassles of falling in (and out of) love. But this 'real' or, if you prefer, 'mature' love also has its hassles. They too are painful, even though they are different.

The hassles of real love

Real love is difficult because wherever it begins to grow, it is accompanied by such things as:

Truth

The problem with falling in love is that there isn't enough truth in it. I suppose most couples stress their likeness first. It's not necessarily untrue that they are alike, but there is usually a lot of unlikeness that they're simply not aware of—and probably don't want to know about.

The trouble then comes as differences surface—more truth comes to light about who they are as individuals. And those differences are what make or break the relationship. Those whose relationships make it are normally those who have learned to live with the truth about their differences, with fuller truth about themselves and the other. Frankly, recognizing and accepting and enjoying that truth is hard work.

Before I got married, I read a book which recommended that a couple have at least one 'good' fight before they get married.² At the time, happily engaged, I thought it was a crazy suggestion. Now, both Deborah and I would acknowledge that for a few years we avoided disagreements by the simple strategy of suppressing important aspects of our personalities that the other might find grating. That could not last indefinitely, but, at the time, it seemed loving to suppress the truth.

So recognizing and living with truth in a relationship is one of the hassles of real love. Real love is also linked to:

Pain

Lewis puts it this way:

There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung

and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no-one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell (Lewis 111).

And he wrote that before the death of his wife Joy. In the movie *Shadowlands*, she is very scathing about his ivory tower existence as an English professor at Oxford. He makes the choice to become vulnerable by loving her and marrying her...and then experiences the truth of his own words: his heart is broken by her death. Pain goes with the territory.

Reality

In that well-known theological text-book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Marjorie Williams, there is a conversation between the rabbit and the skin rocking horse in the nursery:

'Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real.'

'Does it hurt?' asked the Rabbit.

'Sometimes,' said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.'

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,' he asked, 'or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often

happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.' (Williams 8)

There it is again: love and truth and pain and reality. Again, I find I want to ask, if that is how it is—that there are worse hassles involved in mature love than in immature love—'Is it worth it?' Scott Peck says yes, and for this reason: love also brings joy.

Genuine love, with all the discipline that it requires, is the only path in this life to substantial joy. Take another path, and you may find rare moments of ecstatic joy, but they will be fleeting and progressively more elusive... As I grow through love, so grows my joy, ever more present, ever more constant (Peck 160).

Why is there this weird paradox surrounding the subject of love? To answer this I want to go back to Peck's reference to spiritual growth as the goal of love, and ask where God might fit into this whole recipe.

Love, spiritual growth and God

Christian faith says that we are drawn to this kind of love—strange though it seems, full of hassles though it may be—simply because this kind of love is at the very heart of the universe. In Christian understanding, these things—love, pain, reality, truth, joy—all come together in God. Or maybe it makes better logic to reverse the order: they come from God and when we taste them we are tasting something of the reality of God.

I realize that's a very dogmatic statement! How could I know something like that? In Christian understanding, there is not a whole lot we can figure out about God by ourselves, but if we watch Jesus and listen to Jesus, he provides a window into the heart of God.

So when I say God is into love, and truth and even pain, I am thinking of what I learn from Jesus:

- Jesus was a man who extended himself for others (to use Scott Peck's phrase). He cared for the sick, the bereaved, the oppressed. He welcomed the outcast, and made minorities feel at home. The Christian says, 'That's love: so, God is like this.'
- Jesus taught about life and God, about love and death, with a freshness, a clarity and an authority people had never heard before. The Christian says, 'That's truth: so, God is into truth.'
- Jesus also suffered. He wept over the city of Jerusalem and at the grave of his friend Lazarus. At the end of his life, because people could not stand his love and his truth, he was betrayed by friends, and put to death by the occupying army of Rome by a form of execution that was barbaric in the extreme. The Christian says, 'That man knew pain: so, God has experienced pain.'

But Jesus's death is not just a visual aid to understand the heart of God, though it is that. Jesus' death has a practical meaning for us, and this is perhaps the biggest lesson of all about love. Let me explain.

Christian teaching says there is pain at the heart of God's love because of rejection. Who is it that has rejected God's love? We have. Jesus taught that all of us have turned our backs on God, spurned God's love and God's leadership: we prefer to

run our own lives as independent businesses rather than acknowledging God as our CEO.

Now when love is hurt the lover has two options: either to hit back and get revenge, or to absorb the hurt and go on loving. Christians believe that Jesus' death was actually the latter—that God was, in Jesus, absorbing the pain of our rejection of him. (That's what Christians mean when they say things like 'Christ died for our sins.')

So what?

Love always hopes for a response—whether you have fallen in love with someone who hardly seems to notice you exist, or are a parent hoping that a child will grow into a friend, or are wanting to make an offer of friendship which might be rejected.

So what is an appropriate response to a God who loves us enough not to hit back in spite of all our self-centredness and failure, who goes on loving and absorbing the shock waves of human evil even though it kills him?

First, gratitude: to say a heartfelt 'thank you' to God.

Yet gratitude alone can be pretty non-relational, and one-dimensional. You can be grateful to a stranger you never see again. You say 'thank you', maybe even give a reward, and then go on your way. And that is often appropriate.

But the response God hopes for is beyond that. The best response to God's love is to love in return. God invites our friendship: a relationship of love and companionship. God also invites us to partnership: to learn to love the world, to learn Jesus' lifestyle of love.

God knows about love: God invented it. God knows about the pain of love: God has suffered it. But God is also the one who gives the joy of love. That's God's secret, and God wants to share it.

Notes

1. Based on an article by Robert J Trotter, 'The Three Faces of Love,' in *Psychology Today*, (September, 1986).
2. Walter Trobisch, *I Married You*, (Harper Collins, 1989), p 98.

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Peck, Scott. *The Road Less Travelled*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978.

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Williams, Margery. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. London: Carousel, 1976.

For further reading

The Gospel of John—one of the earliest biographies of Jesus.
Available from the Dare address on the back cover.

Becoming a Christian: A practical guide to the why and the how,
by John Bowen (also available from Dare).