

I Know What Love Is

by
Michael Mendizza



'I love you, darling.' 'I love you, too.' I love Pixel the cat. I love radiant sunsets, trees, grass, turtles, the way the ocean splashes against the shore. I love baseball, beer, good movies and trashy novels. Yes! I know what love is.

In ancient Greece Helen of Troy symbolized the prized possession of love that brought disaster to those who tried to keep her. A stolen bride is given in marriage to a wealthy Spartan king who wins her in a contest. Later she is carried off by Paris, the Trojan prince, an act that launched a thousand ships and a ten year war complete with a wooden horse filled with hidden soldiers.

In 1597 another mythic story, one of star-crossed lovers, Juliet and her Romeo by Will Shakespeare carried the prophecy forward. The irresistible blush and pleasure we associate with love seems always to invite its shadow to the party.

From antiquity, in biblical letters, medieval sonnets, Persian poetry, right up to today's country western and pop music – stories abound describing how love slips through our fingers. We talk about it, stalk it, fight wars over it, try to possess and control it - and always seem to fall into despair when it disappears. But can anyone say for certain, 'I know what love is?'

A friend divorced a controlling, narcissistic and violent husband. She feared for her life and at times the lives of their children and yet, simultaneously, she expects her children to love this man. Is that really possible? Does spawning an offspring automatically bestow enduring love on anyone? Consider the possibility that true love is ephemeral, earned and renewed moment by moment.

If anything at all, love, like relationship, is a living thing, dynamic and reciprocal, not fixed like a statue, painting or provincial tradition. Each nurtures the other's awakening, growth and well-being and is, in the process, blessed and nurtured by experiencing the many ways this continued renewal expresses daily in the relationship.

The moment duty, obligation or expectation seeps in, replacing spontaneous affection, trust, and respect, the life-force that is the true relationship dies. No, I argue forcefully, love and obligation are mutually exclusive. The presence of one drives out the other. There is never an obligation to love - even our parents.

Love, say many, is unconditional. Does that mean it is there, full and complete or not at all? I have two children, different as night is to day. I love them both yet express this feeling with each in different ways. It is possible to love partially or one more than another? Or is love like a light bulb, one moment switched on – the next blink it is off?

Years ago I was talking to a beautiful woman at a conference. Her husband kicked open the door and beat her in the hallway, an act that landed her in the hospital. Is jealousy love? Are they related at all?

Was my hormone driven attraction to my high school sweetheart love? Is it love when the sight of a beautiful woman stirs the same blush today?

I can say openly that I love my two sons, my brother and my friend Will.

I also love my wife, my sister, for many years my former wife and Leya the golden retriever. Each is female and my relationship with each is quite different. Does gender affect what we mean when we say 'I love you?'

One moment we are walking hand-in-hand in complete harmony. Smiling, I turn and whisper, "I love you." The next moment you inform me that you are pregnant, that the baby is not mine. Am I still in love?

When I say I love you, there is the subject me, and an object, my wife or baseball. Is love a reaction to someone or some thing? Does it require an object? Is it possible to experience the inner and outer effects of this state we call love without that feeling being attached to an object? Can love express for its own sake and not because something outside evokes it? If this can happen, and I think it does, is the meaning we attach to the experience the same?

Is the capacity to love hardwired or developmental? I rose this question with a neuroscientist years ago assuming the former. He scoffed. The brain, he and other scientists confirm, is 'experience dependent.' Love is a capacity and like all others must be developed. The nature and quality of experiences one has determines if and in what ways this capacity called love unfolds and expresses.

Is love then contained in or dependent on the brain and its development? Some brains develop differently than others. Is the capacity to love experienced and expressed differently by each individual brain? If this is the case, when you say you love me does it mean the same as when I say that I love you?

During the early stages of life developmental sequencing strongly suggests that the sensory-motor system dominates. The experiences we associate with love are then sensory; being held, skin to skin contact, warm pleasurable touch and movement. Pleasure releases hormones, a love-cocktail. The euphoric feeling this cocktail produces is addicting. We become attached, bonded, addicted to the source of pleasure. We like it, want more - demand it! Many drugs simulate similar effects. Is natural or drug induced pleasure - love?

Growing out of and nested in the sensory-motor brain is the seat of mammalian emotions, the mid- limbic-brain. Is the weeping juvenile elephant's grief over its slain mother's body a reaction to love lost or denied?

Is the young elephant's sorrow and rage different from that of Romeo and his Juliet? Do all mammals love as we do?

Thirty-two percent of the world's population, 2,050 million people, are Christians, and Christians believe that Jesus is love. That's what Google says. Belief is a new brain neo-cortical function. Does the addition of the neo-cortex and prefrontal centers of the brain alter the experience we call love? Is love a belief? Many beliefs are fantasies, superstitions. Are our personal and collective fantasies – love?

Or, is love metaphysical, beyond classic physics, not dependent on a brain or a body at all? Using the above as an example, the physical expression of Jesus evaporated over two thousand years ago leaving what, a persistent mental image, a pattern of energy, spirit, a quantum field? Is love a quantum field effect?

Clearly this state of the heart-body-mind-spirit we call love is real and palpable, but can anyone really say for sure, 'I know what love is?'

In a very real and practical way many of the things we imply love is – aren't love. Love is not jealousy. Love is not attachment, desire, possessiveness, the heartbreak, rage and sometimes violence that accompanies the feeling of pleasure lost or of being abandoned.

Can we love without being attached? Can we love and not be jealous, possessive? Can we love without belief, desire and the persistent heartbreak country western songs are made of?

Wisely some have suggested that only through negation, that is, seeing very clearly what love is not - that love is revealed. We keep peeling away the onion skin; love is not this, not this, until nothing (not a thing) remains. And there, in a state the Buddhists call emptiness, love is with its compassion – exploding - spreading like light in all directions.

Perhaps beauty, wonder, empathy and the experience of appreciation come closest. Seeing the beauty of a face, sharing the joy a baby feels crawling on the marble floor, appreciating being alone on the beach as the fading sunlight melts into the sand, the closeness of a hand holding ours. Beauty, wonder, empathy and appreciation may have objects but they are not themselves content, rather each is a state of being in relationship. Each state of being represents a paradigm, a way of seeing and interpreting experiences.

Love therefore isn't a noun, that is, a person, place or thing. You can't hold on to love any more than you can catch the wind in a paper bag. Go ahead, try and discover for yourself why disaster awaits those who try to keep her.

Physician-clown Patch Adams describes authentic play as 'love in action'. Love then is much more a verb, an action; moving, radiating, pulsing. It is a state in which self-centered thought and fear disappears. In this emptiness where self-centered thought and actions have vanished, we see clearly, profoundly that we are the world. Paraphrasing Dillon Thomas - the same life-energy or spirit that forges the blade of grass forges each of us. Thank you, Joseph Chilton Pearce, for this and so many other insights.

We don't see and experience this deep-universal relationship with its care, empathy and playful affection when we are fearful, jealous, possessive or brokenhearted, all self-centered activities.

I may be in this state called love but will it last? Can I say for sure that I will love you tomorrow, maybe or maybe not? It all depends on our capacity to be in (the state) of love – now.

Love has been referred to as 'the intelligence of the heart', which is very different from intellect, knowledge, the activity of imagination, mental images, thought and belief. Intellect is personal and asks only, 'is it possible'. The intelligence of the heart is transpersonal, universal - with appropriateness serving as its guide. So it is with love.

You might say we are like light bulbs. When self-centered fear with its clinging defensive possessiveness is churning - that activity consumes, like a black hole, this universal light and intelligence of the heart. The activities of all the things that are not love prevent the experience and expression of deep relationship we call love. The light bulb is switched off.

When self-centered thought and action are still, the bulb is on. This light and its intelligence are freed, released to express in action naturally without effort.

Most of the time, however, we are self-centered and therefore we are in many ways blind, but not always. Sometimes when beauty or play opens to wonder our self-image disappears. At this moment when the chattering intellect is still and attention complete we are what remains – love.

We, like the light bulb, are switched on, shining brightly, like the sun. Then we see clearly that the light in us and in all things is the same. At that moment, yes...

We know what love is.

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