What’s Love Got to Do With It, Got to Do With It?

---Janet Blank-Libra, September 26, 2011

Sweet love say
Where, how and when
What do you want of me?

Yours I am, for You I was born:
What do you want of me?

*St. Teresa of Avila*

St Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic and nun who lived and wrote in the 16th century, empowers love in this verse through the use of personification, making of us love’s servants. Much more recently, bell hooks, author and educator, wrote that we must think of love as a verb.

Love as a verb, love as a word that describes an action, love as actor and action, love as that to which (to whom?) we are obligated to ask the question: How then, Love, shall I act on your behalf?

For bell hooks and St. Teresa of Avila love is not simply a state of being—I am in love—but a way of being. It’s easy enough to talk about love as integral to the close relationships in my life. I love my child, my husband, family, friends. This love, I hope, I exemplify in my actions. But if I answer “everywhere” to St. Teresa’s question “where” (for who am I to limit love), then I must speak of love as something that should be active in places public, not just private—the work place, the classroom, a personnel council meeting—and then a kind of discomfort or slight confusion or something we can’t name settles in. How should love conduct itself in the public realm? Sadly, this confusion too often leaves love homeless in a world desperately in need of what it has to offer.
Love as a power, as a way of understanding and being in the world, is most easily understood in blood-ties and romantic relationships. These sorts of relationships, I would argue, have been my training ground; they reveal to me the possibilities. How deeply am I capable of loving? Because of those I love, I know. And with that knowledge in hand, I should act as the lesson bids me do.

Once the depth and breadth of love in and of itself is known, it can be made active beyond its origins. This love, love as known and understood through its most powerful form, constitutes the degree to which I ought to be able to take love into the world. It’s not to be kept in the private classroom of the home but taken into the public realm. The great religions of the world call us to love without qualification. The Dalai Lama speaks of great compassion, a love that is impartial, offered to all. The word impartial sounds negative, but in the end it describes the greatest love of all for it is a love that is bestowed fairly and justly. It defies indifference to anything and it calls for action. Without such connection intimate knowledge of life cannot come to pass.

“What do you want of me,” Teresa of Avila asks of love. In part, I think, it—love—wants us simply to recognize and know its potential so that we comprehend the power we possess. Every relationship becomes an opportunity to practice love.

But we limit love, keep it in its place. Here in the academic world, we seldom deliberately and systematically let love help with the problem solving. We perform tests of logic and reason to determine the veracity of a thesis or the reliability of an experiment. But to apply love as a method that possesses the wherewithal to unpack truths? No—it’s unreliable. I think we would be surprised if we were to learn to engage topics empathetically or if we were to, as Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc say in *The Heart of Higher Education*, engage a contemplative model of learning.
Though we know well its power, love remains yet untapped in a world trapped in self-constructed and sanctioned divisions—divisions related to religion, color, sex, public v. private education, pro-choice v. pro-life, straight v. gay, one country against another. It’s inevitable that we will be different in our particulars—and that is good—but divided? That we create. Why? Perhaps it is to the absence of love as a verb that we owe our troubles. And if I, if you subsist too much on a diet of division neither of us will know, we will never know, the full potential of love.

I teach, as you know, English and journalism. In English classes it is often possible to articulate the wisdom of love as we make inquiries into the human condition, revealed in novels and short stories, poems and nonfiction, each text bearing witness to the struggles and triumphs of the human spirit. It’s a bit tougher in journalism to give love license to act. In fact, that institution sent Love to the corner well over a century ago, fearing that to let love have a voice would be to invite the profession’s downfall. As is true of many disciplines, journalism saw the beauty of the objective approach to understanding truth and took it to heart as a method for discerning truth. And there is much, much good to be said for the importance of objectivity in journalism. But, in the end, within a profession that focuses on the day-to-day messiness of life, it is limiting.

Love is not meant to be so restricted.

Sometime in the last decade I became disgruntled with the institution of journalism. More and more I have become frustrated by its willingness to limit itself to a method of inquiry that used in isolation limits the discoveries that can be made. Must the emotions always be sent to the corner? When we reject willingly and with determination the power of love, the beauty of compassion what is it that we reject? Can emotion not lead us, can love not lead us, as objectivity claims to and often does, in productive directions?
To speak of love as a method of inquiry is to move in a risky direction. Words such as compassion and empathy are risky ones, especially in journalism, where the image of the hard-nosed, hard-hitting journalist who brooks no funny-business (that would be love, I think) lingers and lives on. But love—to actually use the word itself -- riskier yet.

Palmer and Zajonc don’t shy away from it. In fact, they talk about an epistemology of love and argue that we must come to terms with love’s potential. I started reading their joint work late last spring and saw in it the potential for deep conversation here at Augustana, where we strive, I think, to honor the whole person, to educate a student so that he or she grows into the depth of his or her humanity—and those depths cannot be known without attention given to head and heart, body and soul. This morning, in my email box was a note from Amazon, letting me know—Amazon is considerate that way—that Parker Palmer has a new book: Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit. He is determined to take us to the depths of our humanity, to teach us, as he and his colleague write, to “[draw] on the full range of [our] human capacities.”

Those words—I like them—the depth of our humanity. They are, however, rather abstract.

I’ve been interviewing journalists and their sources in an attempt to discern ways in which good journalists allow compassion and empathy—and therefore, dare I say it, love—to guide them in their work and toward knowledge of self and other. I’d like to make the abstract a little more concrete—so one example, and it won’t go far enough. I’m interested in storytellers who focus on the lives of individuals who suffer or who are misunderstood by the larger or dominant society. The best writers do not fear they will compromise their ability to tell the truth if they approach such stories with an open heart. As much as the journalists’ stories have provided me with insight into compassionate journalism, it’s the sources’ words that have revealed to me how it is that good
journalists—and I think, by extension, the rest of us when we are at full capacity—have allowed love to define their inquiry. And this is at the crux of what I am thinking deeply about these days: How can journalism make room for love to function as a method of inquiry into the nature of the world? How can love enable the journalist who searches for truth? How can the masses come to understand that love can be as rigorous a method as any other, worthy of respect and consideration, worthy of study?

My sources (who are the journalists’ sources) have described to me what good journalists do and what they describe is what the philosopher Martin Buber called an I/Thou relationship, the opposite of the I/It relationship. In the I-It relationship, one individual operates from a position of authority. The power differential that is created defines the relationship as one within which the subject makes choices about how to use the object to reach a desired (and possibly foreseen) end. The two are not equals in position or equal in their humanity. A relationship between equals, the I/Thou relationship fosters authentic conversation that stands a chance of delivering intimate truths.

David Finkel wrote the book The Good Soldiers after spending about eight months in Iraq with a platoon, the 2-16, that came to be known as the Rangers. One of his sources, Brent Cummings, now a lieutenant colonel, says Finkel made the truth of the soldiers’ experience real for readers. Some members of the platoon, when asked, say that when someone asks them what it was like to fight the war in Iraq, they tell that person to read The Good Soldiers.

How does one translate such a complex reality into truth? When a journalist shapes an interview as an I/Thou dialogue, numerous outcomes follow. Cummings and others who have described their experiences as sources tell me the following must be present, without fail: Honor, respect, compassion, trustworthiness, courage, an ear that puts itself to good use listening purely—not toward a particular end, an ability to set aside the self so as to see better the reality of another, a desire to know a story intimately while striving
simultaneously for objectivity, a willingness to make the self vulnerable. Good reporters create an I-Thou relationship that honors the encounter and its possibilities. The relationship is grounded in an understanding that reporter and source are first and foremost equal in their humanity. These journalists set an example that reveals the rigors and beauty of inquiry grounded in love. And it is this love, manifested in their actions, that leads them to deep, deep truths about the nature of humanity and the myriad life forms sustained by this world.

What if we were to cultivate in our classrooms—as deliberately as we cultivate critical thinking skills and the power of logic—such deep, deep ways of knowing? What if we were to cultivate love as a method for understanding? This is one question among many that Palmer and Zajonc ask in their book, a book that a number of us are going to start unpacking tomorrow in a book group. How might the power of love, expansively defined, be realized, systematically and legitimately, in English and journalism, psychology, sociology, history, biology, communication, chemistry, math, physical education and every other department on campus?

Otto Rank, a psychologist who believed and wrote of the power of creativity, spoke of the “unused life, the unlived in us.” His words, when I first encountered them some years ago, struck a chord within me: Unlived life, unlived life. What if we speak of unused love and thus of love that is “unlived”— love that does not take shape, in other words, as a verb? This unlived love, I think, is not passive love (can there be such a thing?) so much as it is latent love. Our world is too comfortable with unlived love. We have banned love as a way of learning and knowing from some of the most important spheres of our life, including the classroom and the workplace. Can we not better harness the power of love and use it to dissolve divisions, create harmony, generate new ways of being together in the world? Would such an act not be one of compassion toward ourselves? Palmer and Zajonc would say that educators are obligated to reimagine their methods and students obligated to ask
for more from those of us who teach. We are in this together, for we are interdependent.

Thomas Merton defined compassion, an act of love, as a “keen awareness of the interdependence of all . . . living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another” (Fox 24). Albert Einstein, scientist and mystic, saw compassion as crucial to science, saw the need for balance of heart and head, and said this:

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

Einstein recognized that he possessed a kinship with all that existed—a first step toward a comprehensive compassion, toward love as a form of inquiry. Is it not possible that his brilliance grew out of his understanding that absolutely essential to his humanity was his ability to honor equally the gifts of heart and head?

Have the words of people such as Merton and Einstein, one a monk, one a great scientist, gone in vain? Cultural critic and feminist theorist bell hooks has argued that in the world today “[t]he basic interdependency of life is ignored so that separateness and individual gain can be deified” (73). If she is right, and I believe if we are honest, we will acknowledge some truth to her words, then we make more difficult for ourselves the task of knowing the depth of the self, fully and wholly, and for the sake of all that is. In the end, “great compassion” cannot allow for separation, for great compassion must depend on our accepting our interconnectedness and our destiny with love.

Christ made clear both the reality and the importance of our connectedness when he said, “What you do to the least of my brethren you do to me” and “love your neighbor as
yourself”—the great golden rule. Mohammed spoke that message as well. The Dalai Lama continues to bring that message to all humanity on behalf of the Buddha. The list goes on.

I conclude by returning to St. Teresa's poem and to a final thought:

Sweet love say

Where, how and when

What do you want of me?

Yours I am, for You I was born:

What do you want of me?

*St. Teresa of Avila*

**For starters, I would say, love would just like a little respect.**
MORNING WORSHIP
Monday, September 26

Prelude  “Variations on Borning Cry”  Dave Christensen

Welcome/announcements

Invocation

Litany
L:  God you are love  
C:  And you call us to love.
L:  You call us to love
C:  And to learn through loving—both you and our neighbors.
L:  You call us to learn
C:  And teach us to love what we learn.

Prayer

Hymn  “Spirit of Gentleness”  ELW #396

Scripture  I Corinthians 13: 1-11

Sermon  Janet Blank-Libra  
Chair of Moral Values

Hymn  “Borning Cry”  ELW #732

Prayers, Lord’s Prayer

Benediction

Postlude  “My Hope is Built on Northing Less”  Larry Shackley

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Bread for the Apple - Homecoming, SALT and campus ministry are joining forces in to serve the hungry of New York City—in memory of 9/11 and in honor of our homecoming theme. Organizations are encouraged to host fund raising efforts to provide meals at the Soup Kitchen of Trinity Lutheran Church on the Lower Eastside of Manhattan. We’ll see how many meals we can provide between now and homecoming! There will be a bake sale after chapel on Wednesday and Sundays.

Outreach teams host worship services and youth lock ins at churches across our region. Teams generally travel about once/month, are a great way to express and grow in your faith. Group meetings are also a great source of friendship, support and fun. All students are welcome to join. Check with Carol in the chapel office if you have questions about joining, or email Sydney Ipina saipinia09@ole.augie.edu or Anna Bahnson abbahnson10@ole.augie.edu

Pet Blessing - There will be a blessing of the animals on Mon., Oct. 3rd at 10 am. Feel free to bring any furred, feathered or finned friends (no snakes, please) and we will bless them. Treats for animals and humans will be provided!

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Wed. (28th) - Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr. Paul
Fri. (30th) -  Worship, 10 am - Becky Joerger, Sr. Spkr.
Sun. (2nd) -  Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
Mon. (3rd) -  Worship, 10 am - Pet Blessing - Sandra Looney
Tues. (2nd) -  Roman Catholic Mass, 10 am - Fr. David Krogman
Wed. (5th) -  Holy Communion, 10 am - Tamara Jerke, Banquet Dir.
Fri. (7th) -  Worship, 10 am - Lindsey Jacobsen, Sr. Spkr.
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