

## LIVING LOVE

One of our four precious granddaughters asked me, "What is Love?" This article is my reply. Interestingly this question was also the most searched phrase on Google in 2012.

Psychotherapists sometimes remark about the intricacies of mental health, "It's easy to understand but difficult to put into practice!" For example, we know that being accepting or nonjudgmental operationalizes love. How easy is that for us to implement? We readily give notional assent but real assent may elude us.

What separates us from being more loving, kind, thoughtful, caring, and empathetic, etc.? Probably for some it's our life style, our busy-ness or our stress level. Sleep deprivation, myriad worries and task obsession all weigh us down. They obstruct us from living love.

### DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE:

#### LOVE IS A FEELING

When we are young we hopefully feel loved by our parents, siblings, grandparents, and friends. We may be more loved than loving.

The teenage years come with hormonal flooding that confirm us in the belief that love is a feeling. Society cements this belief with songs and stories that many of us endlessly revere.

Of course, both loving and being loved does feel very wonderful. But as we age, we notice that feelings come and go. We don't always feel loving. As we mature, we may decide that we have the power to regulate ourselves and we come to believe that love is a decision.

#### LOVE IS A DECISION

As an act of our free will we can decide to act in loving ways. Gary Chapman in his best selling book, The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts, outlines how varied we are in experiencing love. Some of us feel loved with Words of Affirmation, some with Quality Time, others with Receiving Gifts or Acts of Service, some with Physical Touch. He has a psychometric to identify and rank our preferences in the five spousal love languages.

Historically, in his book, The Art of Loving, Erich Fromm presents an encyclopedic exposition of the many and varied types of love. He explains how the ancient Greeks used seven words to define seven different types of love. The New Testament of the Bible in I Corinthians 13 reminds us that "Love is patient, kind, etc." Two popular descriptions of love are, "The love in your heart wasn't put there to stay, love isn't love until you give it away," and "Love is when you care just as much about the other person's needs and feelings as you do about your own needs and feelings." Developing empathy requires mindful practice.

## LOVE SIMPLY IS

As we grow older some of us grow more content with ourselves and wiser about life. Anthony DeMello captures this perspective in his book, The Way to Love. He conceptualizes love as having four qualities; it is indiscriminate, gratuitous, unself-conscious and epitomizes freedom.

The indiscriminate quality of love means we are not selective about whom we decide to love. We extend love equally to the CEO and the cleaning lady. We stop judging people as worthy or unworthy. We begin seeing them as doing the best they are capable of doing given their life circumstances. This is obviously easy to intellectually understand but difficult to do.

The gratuitousness quality of love means that we love without expecting any type of reward. When we only seek the company of those who give us emotional gratification while avoiding those who don't, our seeming love may camouflage our selfishness.

The unself-consciousness quality of love means that love is so natural and spontaneous that it is blissfully unaware of itself. Love simply is. We've all known someone like this. They are simply loving. It's in their DNA.

The final quality of love is freedom. "The moment coercion or control or conflict enters, love dies. Think for a while of all the coercion and control that you submit to on the part of others when you so anxiously live up to their expectations in order to buy their love and approval or because you fear you will lose them. Each time you submit to this control and this coercion you destroy the capacity to love which is your very nature, for you cannot but do to others what you allow others to do to you. Contemplate then all the control and coercion in your life, and hopefully this contemplation alone will cause them to drop. The moment they drop, freedom will arise. **And freedom is just another word for love.**" (The Way to Love: The Last Meditations of Anthony De Mello, pp. 105-109.)

## HOW DO WE GET THERE?

First, we begin by structuring each of our days to allow ourselves the time to experience being okay with ourselves, with everyone and everything. This experience comes from quieting the mind and relaxing the body so we are okay just in being. This entails solitude, silence and paradoxically being in community. Obviously, to achieve this takes commitment.

Second, we synthesize Love is a feeling, a decision, and it simply is. Each of us probably has our own unique path. I recommend meditation. Choose whatever form or style of meditation suits you. Create your own meditation style. Maybe it means walking in the woods or on the beach. Perhaps sailing the Chesapeake. Whatever equips you to be at peace with yourself, with your life, with others, with God (however you imagine God to be). Then your love will be indiscriminate, gratuitous, unself-conscious and free!

Third, love like many culinary delights takes seasoning and time. Actually, it's an endless journey.

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