

# Love Hurts

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## Reading

[\*To Have Without Holding\*](#) by Marge Piercy

Learning to love differently is hard,  
love with the hands wide open, love  
with the doors banging on their hinges,  
the cupboards unlocked, the wind  
roaring and whimpering in the rooms  
rustling the sheets and snapping the blinds  
that thwack like rubber bands  
in an open palm.  
It hurts to love wide open  
stretching the muscles that feel  
as if they are made of wet plaster,  
then of blunt knives, then  
of sharp knives.

It hurts to thwart the reflexes  
of grab, of clutch; to love and let  
go again and again. It pesters to remember  
the lover who is not in the bed,  
to hold back what is owed to the work  
that gutters like a candle in a cave  
without air, to love consciously,  
conscientiously, concretely, constructively.

I can't do it, you say it's killing  
me, but you thrive, you glow  
on the street like a neon raspberry,  
you float and sail, a helium balloon  
bright bachelor's button blue and bobbing  
on the cold and hot winds of our breath,  
as we make and unmake in passionate  
diastole and systole the rhythm  
of our unbound bonding, to have  
and not to hold, to love  
with minimized malice, hunger  
and anger moment by moment balanced.

My very favorite title of all time is a title that Raymond Carver gave to one of his short stories: "[What We Talk About When We Talk About Love](#)." It strikes me that, like the characters in Carver's story, though we probably can't once and for all define love, it may serve us well to take a little time to examine those things *that we talk about* when we talk about love. After all, love, as we say in our hymnal, is the doctrine of this church.

What we talk about varies, of course, according to context. If we are in church, we may talk about love differently than we would at a bar, at a party, with our friends or family. (Or maybe not.) But certainly, regardless of context, we seem to be faced with a multitude of *types* of love. There is romantic love, spiritual love, love of humanity, love for family, love of nature, of pets, of friends, of God, and, of course, all those trivial loves directed mostly toward inanimate objects, which may include one's affection (nay, obsession) with Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream, or reruns of the Andy Griffith show, or...well, you fill in the blanks with your own list. (Basically, anything that would fit on one of those "I [heart] whatever!" bumper stickers). We use the word love to encompass a whole range of emotive action, from selfless altruism in service to humanity to rather self-absorbed indulgence of our favorite treats...so it's worth trying to separate and articulate what we talk about when we talk about love.

For instance: Does love hurt? When we talk about the pain of love we are very often talking about the realm of romantic love. There is the exquisite suffering of unrequited love, loving someone who, alas, loves you not, the inspiration for an untold number of songs and movies and stories...There is the pain and sorrow of love that dies: "You've lost that loving feeling." There is the hard-to-admit ache of love that simply ebbs away: "You don't bring me flowers." (Feel free to shout out appropriate lyrics as I proceed...)

So love can hurt, and hurts because of the not entirely reasonable expectations that if we love someone, they will love us back—nice when it happens; not always the case—or that the feeling of being "in love" will last forever, or that we will never take the one we love for granted. There is no doubt that the failure to meet these expectations *hurts*. But, in these cases, is it really *love* that hurts us?

There is a song entitled "Love Hurts," recorded, most notably, by Roy Orbison, in which the singer ends up not believing in love at all, precisely *because* it hurts. "Love is just a lie, made to make you blue." But, though it is the lover who hurts in this case, it is not, precisely, *love* that is doing the hurting. Rather, it is the realization that love is not returned. It is the pain of *no* love. In all of these cases, it seems that there may be ways in which we can address the hurt, whether it is through altering unrealistic expectations, or by intentionally expressing the love we feel, or by nourishing the soil of kindness from which love grows. (And that is setting aside for our purposes here the whole question of how closely being *in love* resembles *love itself*).

So what do we talk about when we talk about love *here* in this place, in this sacred space we share every Sunday. Love is, undoubtedly, a primary focus of ours. It is more than that; it is fundamental to anything else that we may focus on. "If we agree in love," says Universalist minister, Hosea Ballou in our hymnal, "If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other

agreement can do us any good." Another reading included from our Universalist heritage, mentioned earlier, says, "Love is the doctrine of this church." There, you want a doctrine? One word: love. Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker says, "Be ours a religion which [has, as] its ritual: works of love." In our sources, we speak of confronting powers of evil with *the transforming power of love*. We are convinced, *I am convinced*, that the world needs more love; that we need to *practice* love; that we need to *nurture* love so that it may grow across this whole world, that it, indeed, has the power to *transform* the world.

We are not alone in that conviction. It is a need that is widely understood, one with which hardly anyone would disagree. We know that love *heals*, that it gives a powerful "yes!" to the dark "no" of despair, that its power is felt exponentially across the whole web of life when we reach out even in the smallest of ways, sharing love and acceptance in our small circles of contact. This love is a chosen response to the inescapable interconnectedness of the web of life. The question is not *if we will be* in relation with the world around us, the question is *how will we choose to be* in relation with the world around us. Will we continue to fabricate irresponsible fantasies of insulation and isolation from everyone else, denying the world of the fruits of our intentional engagement and denying ourselves the opportunity to love wide open, to glow like neon raspberries, float and sail like bright bachelor's button blue beautifully bobbing helium balloons? Or will we choose to meet the world with this love we talk about when we talk about love here every Sunday, this conscientious, concrete, constructive love we celebrate when we join together. This love that *helps*; this love that *heals*;...and this love that...*hurts*?

So if I am out to affirm you all in your belief in the power of love, why would I choose to title this Valentine's Eve service: "Love Hurts"?

Because, while I think it's almost impossible (and maybe unnecessary) to be precise about what love is, I think it's important to be as realistic as we can be about what love does; about the commitment it entails; about the risk it implies.

Let me take a moment to be clear here about what I am *not* saying. I am *not* saying that pain is a defining mark of true love. When I was in theological school, there was an ongoing discussion of what defined the highest love. It was a hallmark of a certain type of Christian theology that *agape* love was the highest form of love. Distinguished from *eros* (romantic, sensual, sexual love) and *fraternal* (friendship type of love), *agape* was sometimes defined as selfless love, the love that Jesus showed to humanity when he gave up his life for us, *sacrificial* love. This concept of the *highest* love came under some well-deserved criticism from feminist theologians, who pointed out that women, especially, were often conditioned by society into expressing their love for husbands and family in terms of sacrifice. To have this held as the highest good by the church effectively sanctioned the continued suffering of women and children and, rather than offering them freedom from unjust and immoral treatment, sanctified abusive situations under the guise of love. It is no virtue to be *selfless*, they said. Another model of healthy love that does not harm oneself must be found.

I wholeheartedly agree with this assessment. The love we celebrate here is not measured in quality by

the amount of pain it generates; it never justifies abuse, but stands with the person in need; nor does it thrive on self-denial, but rather on self-affirmation. And still, even the love we speak of here can *hurt*. There is a sort of pop-psychology notion prevalent in the culture today that says, well, if it hurts, it's not really love. It might be jealousy or unresolved anger or possessiveness or codependence...it is dysfunction of some sort, because love doesn't hurt, love helps.

And I say, yes, love helps, it can heal, it can make us whole, it can transform our lives...AND it can hurt. Because, while it may indeed be true that all we need is love, love doesn't travel alone. It comes packaged in these enormously complex packages of human-ness, with all the anger and humor and jealousy and generosity and arrogance and humility and rootedness and, let's face it, downright quirkiness that humans are known to exhibit. It is packaged within our bodies, embodied along with all of the aches and ecstasies of our physical selves. It vies with our emotions for a place, fights for expression through the miraculous yet imprecise vehicles of human speech and expression and decision, takes form in the well-intentioned yet often clumsy performance of our day-to-day actions. Sometimes those you love will make mistakes, they will drop the ptarmigan eggs...sometimes, (horrors!), *we ourselves* will be the ones to drop the eggs. Sometimes those you love will put salmon in your parka and lemmings in your mukluks, they will throw water on the lamp for no earthly reason, they will run away and howl with the wolves...Sometimes those you love will change overnight into a musk ox or a walrus, they will seem as scary as that polar bear, flashing claws and sharp teeth...It doesn't mean we don't still love them, but YES, IT HURTS!

What did you all hear from the story earlier? ([Mama, Do You Love Me?](#) by Barbara M. Joesse, illustrated by Barbara Lavallee) What do you take away? I hope that you heard the mother's constant affirmation of her love. Over and over, throughout everything..."Still, I would love you." But let me read her responses without those affirmations...Listen for the feelings...

Then I would be sorry.

Then I would be angry.

I would be very angry.

Then I would be worried.

Then, Dear One, I would be very sad.

Then I would be surprised.

Then I would be surprised and a little scared.

Then I would be very surprised and very scared.

Parents, does any of that hit home? Not only parents, everyone! everyone who has loved another person, don't those emotions enter into that love sometimes? Because we care...because we are concerned... because we have risked loving wide open

stretching the muscles that feel

as if they are made of wet plaster,

then of blunt knives, then

of sharp knives.

Then I would be sorry. Then of blunt knives. Then I would be worried. Then of sharp knives.

It hurts because, as Marge Piercy writes: *It hurts* to love wide open! It hurts to love what is mortal! It hurts to love knowing we can't hold on, to love and let go again and again! It hurts to love

with the doors banging on their hinges,

the cupboards unlocked, the wind

roaring and whimpering in the rooms

rustling the sheets and snapping the blinds

that thwack like rubber bands

in an open palm.

but, the fact is, that is a precise description of where we live, all of us, that is a beautiful description of our human condition, and if we are to love, if we are to love with the love that I believe we celebrate here in this place, then we have no choice but to love with abandon, to love with the risk of being hurt, to love what is mortal and maddening and miraculous in its imperfections as well as its beauty, because it is our imperfections that create the hollows in which we can receive love, it is the rough edges of our lives where love can grab hold. Love is the greatest joy and the greatest risk...and the greatest need of all for each and every one of us.

This is not about selfless sacrifice. It is not about martyrdom or masochism or suffering our way to perfection. It is hard and it hurts, but this love, though sometimes it feels like we can't do it, will cause us to thrive, to glow, to float and sail...because we can, we must, bestow it, also, on ourselves.

That feels a little risky, huh? Love myself? Who has more opportunities to disappoint me than me? Who has caused me more pain than me? Love *me*? It's part of loving wide open...

I'd like to close with a poem by Raymond Carver, one of the last poems he wrote before he died, called, appropriately enough, "Late Fragment" (from [A New Path to the Waterfall](#), pg. 122):

And did you get what

you wanted from this life, even so?

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself

beloved on the earth.

So may it be for all.