

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love
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Reading

“Love” by Czeslaw Milosz:

Love means to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many
And whoever sees that way heals his heart
From various ills without knowing it
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

Then he wants to use himself and things
so that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves;
Who serves best doesn't always understand.

Sermon

The fourth of our Six Sources states: The Living Tradition we share draws from Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

It refers to teachings from the Hebrew Scriptures, that are recalled in the Christian New Testament, that say, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27, referring to Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18).

“All our words from loose using have lost their edge,” [said writer Ernest Hemingway](#). This is maybe nowhere more evident than in the ways we use the word “love.” We love our partner, our parent, our child, our friend...and we love football, or a Snickers bar, or Star Trek reruns. Really? Does “love” cover all of that?

For a word that is used so widely, in a whole host of circumstances, it is strange that people are very rarely asked to define it. We use it as if we know precisely what we mean, even though it begs for clarification. We use it in romance novels and we use it in church services; we use it in calls to serve humanity and we use it in vows of marriage; we use it in songs of every style, until it becomes its own style (the love song); we speak of it philosophically and psychologically and historically and hysterically and sadly and madly and cynically and sentimentally and poetically and paradoxically; it occurs between lovers and between family members and between friends and between neighbors; between an individual and her country; between a group of fans and an individual; between God and humans; between humans and the natural world...yet how often do we stop to ask: what are we talking about when we talk about love?

What our Source says is that we take seriously those Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Two interesting questions arise here: How

do we experience God's love? And the question that a law expert asked Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: who is my neighbor? Are they the folks in the closest houses on either side? People on the block? In the whole *neighborhood*? How do we love someone we don't even know? How do we love those people that we *do* know...and, more importantly, those people who know us?

Beginning with the first question, my suggestion is that the love of God can be experienced, by theists and atheists alike, as existence; awareness; "the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is" (Welch, Sharon. *Sweet Dreams in America*, pg. 136). We respond to this amazing and unlikely circumstance of *being*. Existence, like the sunlight, is bestowed on the just and the unjust. It is grace.

But do we respond with *love*?

When the law expert asked Jesus, "Who *is* my neighbor?" Jesus responded with the now-well-known parable of the Good Samaritan:

'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' [The lawyer] said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' (Luke 10:25-37, New Revised Standard Version)

You see how Jesus twisted that around? The lawyer asked how to identify those whom he was urged to love by the Jewish law; in other words, how to spot a neighbor. Jesus told him, not how to spot a neighbor, but how to *be* a neighbor. It is a fundamental change of focus.

And Czeslaw Milosz's words supply another important change of focus for me. Love, we imagine, is about closeness. It is about drawing ever nearer to the beloved. But Milosz suggests that love--the love that heals our hearts from various ills without knowing it--that *this* sort of love is about distance.

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Love means to look at myself the way one looks at distant things. I may think that the closer I get, the better I can see, but that is only true up to a point, isn't it? After a certain point--as I come closer and closer to a painting, for instance--I can lose sight of the whole picture. Images become hopelessly abstracted from the whole. If I were to judge the entire work at this point, I would be at a serious disadvantage. I have to step back to regain perspective; to *appreciate* the whole; to appreciate the beauty and rightness of that one small place within the picture.

Milosz knows, as Jesus knew, that my tendency, though I may say it is to get closer to those I love, is to stay the closest to my own self, my own immediate interests, my own perceived security, my own image of myself. I can only imagine what went through the heads of the people who passed by the man who

had been beaten and robbed, but no doubt they had perfectly justified their actions to themselves. I say that with some confidence, because I have done it. I draw closer and closer to my own self, my own interests, my own security, and I see everything from this distorted perspective. I still talk about love, but what am I talking about really? An emotion? A *commitment* to love, or a desire to *be* loved? To have my needs met? To have the other see me in as idealized a fashion as I see myself? I try to love, from that self-absorbed viewpoint, but it is simply another feature that sustains my distorted perspective of the world as being made for me. I love the set for my movie, believe me. You couldn't do much better than Earth, right? And I really thank you all for being supporting actors in this script...but let's face it, this is *my movie*. It's so clear to me...but not to you?

Love becomes a great paradox when I stand so close to the painting of this world, seeing only my piece in it, that I foolishly imagine that I am the subject. From that standpoint, I can talk about love, but what I mean is some sort of support that I will do my best to elicit from others with talk of love, doing my best to act it out. When I am that self-absorbed—when I am that self-deluded—that I can't recognize the integrity and importance of *other lives* except in how they relate to me, I can't truly love. Though I may ask the lawyer's question from this standpoint, seeking to do my best to fulfill what is required of a good person, the question is really not, "Who is my neighbor?" The question here is best expressed by the inimitable Tina Turner: "What's love got to do with it?" When I am completely wrapped up in myself, caught in the world of manipulation and protection and emotion and insecurity, I cannot hope to love. Because

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As I step back from the painting, though I am faced with my own relative unimportance compared to what I had believed, I am also struck by the brilliant, beautiful importance of everyone and everything else. When I touch that awareness, maybe only for brief moments, the full awareness that other people are living lives, suffering through pain, overcoming and not overcoming challenges, trying their best, I am changed. Roger Housden writes in a book entitled Ten Poems to Open Your Heart, in his chapter on Milosz's poem, "When you are no longer center stage, you can allow others to breathe alongside you; you can appreciate their existence as being equal in value to your own...No longer the star in your own movie, you can feel a kinship with others that naturally gives rise to a sense of belonging." Suddenly, I am not worried about conserving my small store of love for the right people...I am brimming with compassion for the heartbreaking beauty of it all.

Seeing things this way, I can confidently say with the poet:

*...I'll love you as long
As the furrow the plow,
As However is Ever,
And Ever is Now.*

[For] it is then, with distance, Housden says, that I can feel a sense of kinship and belonging, which I sought in futility when I was struggling to stay close, holding onto the notion that everything was about me. It is then that I can grow closest to my beloved, for I have stepped far enough away to *see* her.

In the short story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," by Raymond Carver, two couples sit drinking together and talking about love; trying to figure out this thing called love. One character who is a doctor tells of an older couple that was in a terrible car accident. "Casts and bandages, head to foot, the both of them," he says, "Little eye-holes and nose-holes and mouth-holes...Well, the husband was very depressed for the longest while. Even after he found out that his wife was going to pull through, he was still very depressed. Not about the accident, though. I mean, the accident was one thing, but it wasn't everything. I'd get up to his mouth-hole, you know, he'd say no, it wasn't the accident exactly but it was because he couldn't see her through his eye-holes. He said that was making him feel so bad. Can you imagine? I'm telling you, the man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his...head and see his...wife...Do you see what I'm saying?"

Love has something to do with being able to *see* the other person. When I achieve distance from my self, I am able to see another.

It is then that I can be a neighbor, because I have seen my relatedness.

How many saw "Sicko" yesterday? Michael Moore's powerful movie on the appalling state of healthcare distribution in this country asks about this relatedness. It asks the question "who is my neighbor?" It asks the question: What happened to "we"?

Why would you pay for someone else's healthcare? Moore asks a Canadian man, who is quite shocked by the question. Finally he says, it's just what you do. I know they would do the same for me. It's what we do.

But one needs perspective. Love has something to do with being able to *see* the other person. When I achieve distance from my self, I am able to see another.

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The Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, wrote his most famous book on this theme of fully acknowledging the lives of others and called it *I and Thou*. Most of us, he says, live in the world of I and It. We treat other people as objects...they may be beloved objects, but objects nonetheless, existing for our pleasure or comfort or support or any of a number of other needs we have in this life. We come into true relationship with other people when we attain the awareness of other people as *other*, living fully through themselves as we seek to live fully through our own selves. Now, practically speaking, Buber says that we cannot live *always* in this awareness of I and Thou. I-It is the life of the everyday, in which we have tasks to perform, work to carry out, errands to run, etc. But if we live *only* in the world of I-It--without that stepping back that allows us the distance to see a fuller picture, that allows us to see ourselves the way one looks at distant things, that allows us to see others not as supporting actors but as

central actors in their own stories—if we live *only* in the world of I-It, we are doomed never to have the capacity to love.

I believe that the distance that the poet Milosz and the theologian Buber recommend applies to all types of love. Though love will continue to be talked about in a wide variety of ways, though it will be defined and re-defined, it seems to *always* have something to do with our awareness that we are one among many.

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Neighbor.

Closing Words (I Corinthians 16:13-14 - #713)

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith; be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.