

The Anatomy and Art of True Love  
Victor Ashear  
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I am sure most of you have a favorite author for whom when you read their words it feels like they are talking to you. Their words are soothing and enlightening. You might be thinking I wish I could have stated it just the way they did. The author I feel most that way about is the humanist, psychoanalyst, and social philosopher Erich Fromm. Perhaps Fromm's most widely known work is, The Art of Loving. I could not think of a better way to approach this month's theme than by referring to this enduring work, first published in 1956 and still in print.

Fromm opens the book with a challenging question: is love is a pleasant feeling or rather an art that requires time and practice to develop? Also he asks if love is something to be gotten rather than something we give? As you might guess, giving love to others is what the "art of loving" is really about. Fromm's concept of love is close to *agape*, the Greek word for unconditional or divine love. Traditionally men have tended to believe that to become rich and powerful is the way to achieve love. And many women have tended to take the view that the path to love is to be attractive and popular. Fromm dispels these still popular but superficial ideas as quite different from the meaning of true spiritual, love.

Fromm's theory of love begins with the idea that humans are gifted with powers of reason, as a means to restrain instinct in meeting life challenges. But thinking results in being separated from nature. Thinking is both a blessing and a curse. Thinking disconnects us from the immediate experience of the world, as the Buddhists have said. Love is the way we are able to overcome this separation and to find connection and meaning. For Fromm the Garden of Eden story highlights this dilemma of the human condition. When Adam and Eve ate from fruit of the tree of knowledge they were expelled from Eden, meaning separated from nature. Fromm believed that separation from nature is the source of anxiety. The deepest need of human beings is to overcome anxiety, separateness and isolation.

In pre-modern societies animal worship, animal masks, rituals, etc. were a way to overcome separateness. What are our ways? Promiscuous sex, drugs and alcohol have been some of the unhealthy ones. Conformity to a group is another unhealthy way to overcome separateness. Totalitarianism is an extreme example of how people have tended to overcome isolation. Those who choose it find a kind of security in following an authoritarian leader. Many of these followers are afraid to be different, and many don't have the choice, so they conform rather than express their individuality and creativity. A healthy way to overcome separateness is through unique, creative activity in which the artist or crafts person merges with nature through their creation. Love for Fromm is also a creative, artistic activity. He calls love an art. Fromm maintains: "The full answer

[to the problem of existence] lies in the achievement of interpersonal union, fusion with another person, in love. The desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving.... Without love humanity would not survive." Fromm distinguishes true love from "symbiotic union." In the latter case one's individuality is suspended in order to comply with the other's wishes as in authoritarianism. In contrast, "mature love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality." Fromm calls it a paradox that two unite as one, and yet maintain their integrity. Real love is always practiced freely and never under compulsion or fear. Love is an act of giving not of receiving. Love does not expect anything in return.

Giving is the highest expression of potency.... Giving is more joyous than receiving not because it is a deprivation but because in the act of giving lies the expression of my aliveness. The most important sphere of giving, however, is not that of material things, but lies in the specifically human realm. What does one person give to another? He gives of himself, of the most precious he has, he gives of his life. This does not necessarily mean that he sacrifices his life for the other — but that he gives him of that which is alive in him; he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness — of all expressions and manifestations of that which is alive in him. In thus giving of his life, he enriches the other person; he enhances the other's sense of aliveness by enhancing his own sense of aliveness. He does not give in order to receive; giving is in itself exquisite joy. But in giving he cannot help bringing something to life in the other person, and that which is brought to life reflects back to him; in truly giving, he cannot help receiving that which is given back to him. Giving implies to make the other person a giver also and they both share in the joy of what they have brought to life. In the act of giving something is born, and both persons involved are grateful for the life that is born for both of them. Specifically with regard to love this means: love is a power, which produces love; impotence is the inability to produce love.

Fromm states that the ability to love as an act of giving requires the development of a level of maturity. "The person capable of love has grown beyond dependency, narcissism, the wish to exploit, and the need to acquire possessions." People capable of love are competent to apply their own powers to attain their own goals. Those capable of love have four additional qualities, **care**, **responsibility**, **respect** and **knowledge**. I will expand on these four qualities.

"Love is the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love." We **care** and labor for that which we love. A parent cares for their child, a gardener cares for their garden. We care for what we value, what we regard as precious to us. If as a nation we cared for others we would not need a "Black Lives Matter" movement. Neither would we be separating immigrant families at the border.

What if our nation decided to show care for all people? Care is in keeping with our first UU Principle.

The second personality characteristic of people capable of mature love is that of **responsibility**. But Fromm does not mean the responsibility imposed by another, rather the “personally understood” sense. We take on the responsibility to love others because it makes sense to us. We feel a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of others in the same way we feel it towards ourselves. We feel this because we are part of the human family. Generations who came before us worked to make life better for us. As well many of our contemporary fellow humans contributed to our well-being. We realize that we are all in this world together. As our 7<sup>th</sup> UU Principle states we are all interconnected and because we are we are responsible for the well-being of others.

To **respect** another is to see that other as he or she actually is, a unique individual. We all want to be treated as our unique selves. We all want to be treated as if we mattered and had worth. Respecting others creates the opportunity for collaboration. It is a foundation of healthy relationships. When we respect another we avoid exploitation. When we respect another we desire others to grow and develop as they wish and to their full potential. Fromm stated that we are able to respect another only so far we ourselves are independent and emotionally secure. We can respect another when we are not threatened by the other’s abilities, accomplishments, possessions, etc. Also if we are independent and secure then we don’t feel superior those more limited. Some people make the mistake of deciding for others in a desire to help. However not allowing others to make their own decisions is not respectful. When others are at a disadvantage because of poverty, lack of education, etc. it is especially important to be respectful and mindful to protect their dignity and their choices.

The fourth quality is **knowledge**. Some of you may remember the 1969 song, “To Know You is to Love You” by Bobby Vinton. I can love someone to the extent that I know that person deeply. The more I know about others the better I can attend to their needs. Knowledge tells me when another needs our active listening, encouragement, support, information, or some other specific kind of help. I had a client who was told by both his parents from an early age not to depend on either of them but to look to himself for help. This client did become independent but he suffered from the feeling that he did not matter to anyone and has felt a life long lack inherent worth. The client kept working at achievements such as diplomas and job changes in an effort to prove he had worth, but to no avail. One thing this client needed, was to hear the message that he was valuable just the way he was and it was not anything about him that caused his parents to not give love. When you know a person well you understand what they need. When you give what is needed that is love.

Besides delineating the four qualities or conditions of mature love, care, responsibility, respect and knowledge, Fromm talks about the different types of

love relationships. Our first experience of love of course is as an infant. Infants don't have to do anything to earn love. They are loved just because they are alive. As children mature, responsibilities begin to be placed on them and love becomes, or at least is perceived as, conditional. Fromm believed both of these aspects of love, unconditional and conditional, are necessary for the transition to becoming a mature loving person. A child understands, "I love because I am loved." The mature adult understands, the opposite, "I am loved because I love." Also mature love is not "exclusive" to a few people but extends to all of humanity. The story of the Good Samaritan that Rev. DeHart spoke of last Sunday illustrates this level of love. It is part of our Judeo-Christian heritage and is the first of our 6 UU Sources.

The mirror image of the love a child receives is the love a parent provides. A loving parent not only cares for the infant's physical needs but also communicates that it is good to be alive. Parental love is not reciprocal; it is not the love between equals. Therefore it is altruistic and unselfish. Fromm suggests that what may motivate parental love is the need for transcendence.

This need for transcendence may be one of the most basic needs of [humanity] rooted in the fact of [our] self-awareness, in the fact that [we are] not satisfied in [our] role of the creature that [we] cannot accept [ourselves] as dice thrown out of a cup. [One] needs to feel as the creator, as [one] who transcends the role of being created.

Through the role of parent one becomes a co-creator of life. We make the transition from being receivers of life to givers of life. We join with the creative energy of the universe. Love thereby gives us a degree of immortality.

How does self-love fit into a mature understanding of true love? Some have suggested that love for others and love of self are mutually exclusive. In that view, the more love one has for self, the less available for others. Fromm points out that the Biblical commandment to, "love your neighbor as yourself" expresses the opposite. The Bible lesson is that each of us is a human and worthy of the same love we are encouraged to offer to others. Fromm explains the psychological rationale for this: "...an attitude of love toward themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others." Again, love is considered here to be not simply a feeling but rather it is an expression of activity and involves care, respect, responsibility and knowledge. As we said love is striving for the welfare and happiness of others. These same four attributes apply to self. Fromm states without this level of self-regard one is not capable of loving others in a complete way. Some mistake self-love for selfishness but the two are opposites. For Fromm, selfishness, or narcissism, is an attempt to compensate for the inability to love oneself. Neurotic "unselfish" devotion to others in a person who shows no capacity for self-love is a core symptom that must be

addressed in psychotherapy. “Unselfishness” in this frame is an over-compensation for the failure of self-love. Meister Eckhart said:

If you love yourself you love everybody else as you do as yourself. As long as you love another person less than you love yourself, you will not really succeed in loving yourself, but if you love all alike including yourself, you will love them as one person.... Thus he is a great and righteous person who, loving himself, loves all others equally.

Fromm also talks about the love of “God” as occurring at different levels of maturity. At the elementary level God is a being like a parent who needs to be obeyed in order to avoid punishment or like a parent who soothes and comforts. Fromm regards a more mature understanding of God as abstract idea, in other words an “ideal principle” rather than a being. The theologically mature individual does not, “love God as a child loves a parent, does not pray to God, nor ask God for anything, nor professes any knowledge of God.” In the mature case, God becomes a symbol for the ideals for which we strive as humans. To love God in the abstract sense, if we were going to use the word, would mean then, to long for the attainment of the full capacity to love, for the realization of that which “God” stands for in oneself.

The realm of love, reason, and justice exists as a reality only because, and in as much as [humans have] been able to develop these powers in [themselves] throughout the process of evolution. In this view, there is no meaning to life, except the meaning that [we ourselves] give to it; [each of us] is utterly alone except in as much as [we help] another.

The title of Fromm’s well-known book is “The Art of Loving.” By “art” he meant a **discipline** or a practice that has to be cultivated if one is to become proficient in loving others. Besides discipline, **concentration** is necessary in order to become proficient and effective. That means giving complete attention to the subject of your love. The third requirement to develop the art of loving is **patience**. One has to expect that the art does not develop all at once. Just as learning to be a pro tennis player must begin by practicing the serve. Or learning to play the violin begins with playing scales. To become really proficient one has to devote oneself. One needs to apply discipline, concentration and patience for their whole life. The discipline you devote must come from a sense of personal pleasure rather than from a harsh disciplinarian imposing their will. Fromm wrote the book in the early 50’s and talked about how hard it was to concentrate then with so much competition for attention. I suspect it is harder now in the age of cell phones and tablets. When we are concentrating on others we are listening and we are fully present. To be effective at concentrating on and listening to others one must be able to also be attentive to oneself. Parents are naturally attentive and responsive to their babies. In the same way we can notice when we are becoming fatigued, or sad, or annoyed.

Proficiency in the art of loving requires that a person overcome the tendency to look at the world only from the standpoint of one's own needs. This Fromm calls "narcissism." It is a normal stage of emotional development but many never grow from that to the capacity to see the world objectively, in other words, separate from one's own needs. You can't love if you can't do this. Here is an example; when a family member does not live up to our expectations do we deride them instead of accepting them as they are? To be objective includes the ability to reason, and to have humility (to realize one's limitations). To love is in part, to see others as they really are, and separate from my biased view. To be effective in the art of loving is to apply objectivity and humility in relation to all others.

The practice of the art of love also requires "faith." The faith Fromm is talking about is the conviction about the "reliability and un-changeability of fundamental attitudes at the core of [one's] personality."

Love is an active state of concern and investment in the other. It is a process of observing and listening to the other with full concentration. Further the act of loving extends beyond family and close friends to include coworkers and all one comes into contact with. Love extends beyond simple "fairness." Fairness involves reciprocity, in other words giving to the other only to the degree that the other gives to you. Mature love is altruistic; it asks nothing in return. Mature love is not transactional.

To summarize, the four components of ability to love another are, care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. The practice of the art of love includes discipline, concentration and patience. True love for others also stems from a deep ability to love ourselves. Finally the ability to love is rooted in faith that others and we are good, worthy and reliable. We are capable of making and keeping promises. We are able to appreciate others as they objectively are and not from a biased perspective. When we love we have the courage to act in support of our values. Fromm does not in any way suggest that the art of love is easy. Rather it is a life long pursuit and one that requires constant attention. The reward for our effort at being artful lovers of humanity is that we overcome separateness and we feel alive, and our lives have meaning and purpose. To the extent that we love we merge with the creative energy of nature.

May we all strive to be artful lovers.

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