

Love & Sobriety

Reflections on a Tree

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MY HOPE, AS A PSYCHOTHERAPIST with a concentration in addictions-related work, is that my clients will fall in love with sobriety. By “sobriety” I don’t mean merely a condition of abstinence from whatever their addictive “fix” may have been, but a transformative shift of consciousness. Some years ago I found that this transformation can be richly summed up in a very simple phrase when a client of mine asked me for the most adequate definition of “sobriety.” Running quickly through the Rolodex of my mind, I was surprised to draw a blank, so I blurted out the assertion that sobriety is “the ability to show up for life.” I immediately felt embarrassed, because that description seemed so simplistic. Over the years, though, I’ve found it to be quite satisfactory (and, indeed, variously formulated by others well before my own improvisational offering¹). In effect, then, I am saying that my wish for my clients is that they *fall in love with life*.

Well, that’s just dandy. But we must admit that “love” is itself notoriously challenging to define.² So in this essay I want to share with you some ways of thinking about love that I’ve found especially helpful in my life, and in my work. These thoughts, in rough outline, were prompted a couple of decades ago when I found myself in a mental argument with a writer I generally hold in high esteem. He had offered a characterization of love - what love is, and, as well, what it is not - that didn’t align well, in some respects, with the experiences and understandings of love which have seemed true in my experience. For one thing, this writer asserted that authentic love only occurs in relationships between people – or between people and God. He rejected the idea that one could love an animal or an idea; a poem or a tree. Even after allowing for the laudable discipline of paring away sentimentality, infatuation, loyalty, and the many other experiences which we often confuse with love, I found that this proscription ran counter to my experience of love as a state of being/relationship which could potentially include anything whatsoever – and, in very rare and precious moments, everything.

These disagreements prompted me to ask myself just what, then, might be an adequate characterization of love? To establish a kind of mental laboratory to examine this question, I brought to mind an image of myself loving a tree – for indeed, I have had the experience of loving trees - particular trees - on many occasions. What emerged from this reflection has, over the years, proven enormously helpful in my work with clients; contemplations on my personal life and on human striving and struggle in general; and my thinking about addiction, and its resolution, in particular.

The first aspect of love to reveal itself during this meditation was *Acceptance*. It was evident almost immediately that, in the event of loving a tree, I find myself accepting it absolutely; there

¹ The theologian Hugh Kerr observed that “All wisdom is plagiarism; only stupidity is original.”

² For example, the venerable Oxford English Dictionary (OED) devotes four dense, multi-columned pages to the word “love” – leaving the reader feeling much more literate about the word, its origins and employment over the years, no doubt, but certainly not having penetrated into all the corners and nuances of its meaning.

is no aspect of the tree, its asymmetries, injuries or irregularities, which is unacceptable. Now, there may be - and often are - experiences of *disapproval* regarding some person or thing I find myself loving.³ Indeed, as has often been noted, it is possible to love that which you do not even *like*. If this is true, then; if it is possible to disapprove of, and/or dislike some one or thing which I still find myself loving – what do I mean by Acceptance in this instance? Simply this: nothing needs to be changed about the object of my love in order for me to experience that love; there is *unconditional* acceptance. And we will find, as we move further into this exploration of love, that the quality of unconditionality is a constant. In fact, it is my perspective that there is not, and cannot be, any such thing as conditional love; anything which calls itself love, but has conditions attached to the presence or existence of that love, turns out to be something *other than* love.

This was a beginning, then – the realization that anything I love I find unconditionally acceptable. But this certainly fell well short of adequacy; brief reflection will bring to mind innumerable things which are accepted but not loved. The Kleenex box in front of me, for example – I find it unconditionally acceptable, but I don't find myself loving it. (I don't rule out the possibility, as we'll see below, but that's not my present experience.) So I knew I needed to reach further and deeper to fathom the phenomena of love for myself. As I dwelt with the memory of loving the tree (a particular tree, by the way, near Watershops Pond in Springfield, MA), a recognition began to emerge that there is a part of me that somehow reaches out and engages with - encompasses, as it were - that which is loved – although this experience is in no sense about possessing or controlling. As I stayed with the impression, the word which came to me was *Embrace*. This works very well, so long as it is not confused with physical embrace. While physical embrace may take place (and yes, I have had the considerable, albeit richly caricatured, pleasure of hugging trees), embrace as I'm using it now is an emotional event; an embrace by one's essence - spirit - of the essence or spirit of that which is loved.

This notion of embrace, then, conjoined with acceptance, felt closer to the event of the heart which love is. But still something was missing. So I went back to my meditation on the beloved tree. After a bit it suddenly welled up in me that, with this tree, as with anything I may love, be it animate, inanimate, corporeal or abstract, there is something in me which wants to shout out a great *Bravo!* - a *Hallelujah!* - that this exquisite *One* is in the universe!⁴ And the word which came forth to describe that impulse was *Celebration*.

With the recognition of that last piece I felt as though I may have arrived as close as I am able to come in accomplishing the notoriously impossible task of grasping love - or for that matter any other deep concern of the heart - with the clumsy fingers of language. I hasten to say that I don't imagine that this characterization leaves no room for other, and quite different, representations. I try to think about such matters in holographic terms: if you view a hologram from different angles, different elements of the image will be revealed, and others concealed, just as happens in real life when you change your vantage point in a given setting. (A photograph

³ As a hypothetical example, let's say that a tree I love is frail, and one day a large branch topples onto my house, doing extensive damage. I will clearly disapprove of - be pained by - this event, this happenstance. But if my love is the real thing, not mere sentiment, my acceptance of the tree itself will not cease or diminish in the midst of this disapproval. A similar but more familiar and more poignant example applies in the case of a parent who watches a child behave in ways they find disgraceful. To the extent that there is authentic love for that child, the disapproval felt by the parent will not disqualify or compromise their basic acceptance of the child -- though it may well bring a tragic tenor to the relationship.

⁴ I find that I can have this *Bravo!* experience as readily with a poem or a scientific explication as I can a flower or a friend.

differs from a hologram in that, with a photograph, the information available to you remains constant, no matter your angle of observation; you can't *see behind* things in the photograph by changing position.) One can examine, reflect on, and engage with the hologram of love from perspectives which are quite other than the trio of descriptors I came across in my little exercise, and so discern and evoke many other domains and dimensions of love. I believe it is the work of all of us to seek ever deeper into the nature and meaning of love, while accepting that we can never, in this life, bring this work to a fully comprehensive conclusion.

Nevertheless, appreciating that it is necessarily incomplete, I have found this three-fold characterization of love, born from my meditation on the experience of loving a tree, to be useful in a number of ways in attempting to understand the world of addiction, and the path of sobriety. So let's look at the three elements in some detail, beginning with:

Acceptance

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ACCEPT something or someone? As noted above, it doesn't necessarily mean that you like, or approve of, that which you accept. Nor does it, by itself, mean that you love it. Depending on your temperament, there may be a great deal - or very little - that you find acceptable in the world around you. Let's examine the alternatives to acceptance, to aid in our understanding of acceptance itself.

If I don't have an attitude of acceptance regarding something, then I am either unaware of it, indifferent to it, or I have an attitude of rejection. Of course, we are unaware of most of the universe all of the time. And I suggest that what we call indifference is actually a kind of unawareness; we register that there is something there, but we are not giving it our attention.⁵ My observation is that, when we do give our attention to anything, we find ourselves leaning either toward acceptance or rejection. The root meanings of the word "accept" refer to *receiving*; the root meanings of the word "reject" refer to *throwing*, as in throwing away. And we position ourselves, usually unconsciously, as either accepting or rejecting everything in our field of consciousness; all the aspects of our physical environment, for example - the temperature, the view which presents itself to us, ambient and particular sounds, the array of objects which we observe, the time of day or year that we occupy - all of these things and many, many more, to the extent that they occupy our attention, we regard with either an attitude of reception (acceptance), or of pushing away (rejection).

And of course, there are the people in our lives. From the most casual encounters to the public and private persons central to our lives, we are constantly experiencing attitudes of acceptance or rejection regarding the color of a person's shirt (not to mention skin), their tone of voice, choice of phrasing, body-odor, or an infinitude of other superficial considerations. Then we get to the matters of substance - our experience of a person's character; those deep, intuitive resonances we have about people; critical issues of alignment or non-alignment, harmony or disharmony, regarding philosophies, politics, aesthetics; etc.

But for many of us issues of acceptance or rejection are most acute with respect to ourselves. Our own appearances, emotions, thoughts, longings and behaviors are subject to an unceasing

⁵ There is a meaning of the word "indifferent" which denotes being neutral ; unbiased. I am using the meaning of indifferent which has the sense of "Without emotion or interest. Unconcerned, unresponsive, apathetic, impassive, listless, stolid, uninterested, lethargic, phlegmatic." (American Heritage Dictionary)

review. “It’s not acceptable that I have this feeling (anger, fear, or whatever);” “dressing in this way is acceptable (or unacceptable);” “I find this thing that I’m doing - or the manner in which I’m doing it - acceptable (or unacceptable);” etc., ad infinitum.

We subject the whole experiential kaleidoscope of our lives to a critical scrutiny that is such a constant, integral part of the flow of mental and emotional process within us that it occupies our conscious attention only a small fraction of the time. Usually these impulses toward acceptance or rejection are mere blips in the background our awareness, overshadowed by the more compelling activities and feelings of our daily lives. But they add up. And they matter, greatly. The person who finds themselves by and large in an attitude of non-acceptance - rejection - toward the affairs and events of life lives in a profoundly different, and darker, world than another person who finds, in the main, that the happenings of life are acceptable to them. Again, not necessarily approved of or cherished, but accepted – *received*.

Perhaps the simplest articulation of acceptance is the expression, “What is, is.” By contrast, the attitudes of non-acceptance can be phrased, “What is, shouldn’t be,” or, in the most extreme rendering, “What is, isn’t.” These latter expressions, characterizing the two stances through which non-acceptance is actualized, could be termed *indignation*, and *denial*. In examining this subject of non-acceptance we tread on some ground which is linguistically ambiguous and emotionally charged. One of the difficulties has to do with a perfectly legitimate ambiguity in the language regarding the word “acceptable.” It is a fitting and commonplace usage to say, “I find that situation unacceptable,” by which we mean that we disapprove of the situation, and define it as needing to be changed. We are, in this case, saying, “What is, should be changed.” This perspective can serve as a motivational base for intervention to change a situation deemed unacceptable. Now, “What is, should be changed,” and “What is, shouldn’t be,” are two statements seemingly only a hairsbreadth apart in meaning, if that. But one proposes to take reality as it is, and intervene to effect change; the other argues that reality should not be what it is. Case in point: imagine that you came home to find your house on fire. While person A, accepting that “What is, is,” may invest in vigorous action on behalf of putting out the fire, or rescuing persons or belongings, person B may be burdened with a sense of indignation and outrage - “What is, shouldn’t be!” - which will serve them to no good end whatsoever, and indeed, to the extent that it is preoccupying, may well prevent them from thinking and acting with the clarity which the situation demands.

Of course, the other mode of manifesting non-acceptance - denial - is an even greater deterrent to effective action. You don’t want a guy in the bucket brigade who doesn’t recognize that there’s a fire. This sounds frivolous, but in fact this kind of denial occurs routinely in situations where people are in a state of shock – and in our culture shock is alarmingly commonplace and sustained.

So what does all this have to do with love? Just this; when I look at anything, and either insist that it shouldn't be what it is, or refuse to register that it exists at all, there is no possibility that I can regard that entity or situation through loving eyes. And, from the other end of the equation, if I find myself regarded by someone who either is indignant that I am who I am, and is convinced that I should be intrinsically different - or who fails to recognize me at all - then clearly I can not feel loved by that person.

On the other hand, if I feel that a person recognizes me, and accepts me as viable and worthy of fundamental respect - even if they may disagree with my opinions, or disapprove of certain of

my behaviors - I experience an essential ground of dignification between us. This need not, and often will not, evolve into a relationship of love. But it establishes the ground where love is a possibility.

So acceptance, then, as I first noticed in my meditation on loving a tree, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for there to be love. This leads us to:

Embrace

THERE IS A KIND OF CONTINUUM of relative intimacy suggested by the etymological origins of the words “acceptance” and “embrace.” As we saw above, the linguistic foundations of “acceptance” denote a kind of *reception*. And we find that the linguistic roots of the word “embrace” refer us to the idea of *two arms*. In embrace, then, the receptivity of acceptance is invested with a kind of warmth and whole-hearted enthusiasm; there is no reservation or holding back. This quality is reminiscent of my earlier remarks about unconditionality; the embrace is of the complete entity. There is not a selecting out, a saying, “Well, I embrace certain parts of that which I love, but I exclude these other parts.” Any embrace which undertakes to set conditions like that turns out to be inauthentic – just as we saw that “conditional” acceptance is not really acceptance at all.

In the event of authentic embrace, three important things are happening. Let’s use as an example a mother’s embrace of a child. (We speak here of both physical and emotional/spiritual embrace, but particularly about the latter, because while emotional/spiritual embrace can exist without physical contact, a mere physical enfolding lacking the emotional/spiritual component is not embrace in the sense that we’re using the word here.) First, the mother has the experience of including - emotionally and spiritually reaching out and joining with - the child. Second, the child has the experience of being included by and joined with the mother. But third, they both experience participating in a relationship which is more than - other than - just the “sum of its parts.” Their state of embrace, of inclusion, is something which has its own intrinsic worth, integrity, and presence. All three of these experiences are sustaining and life-enhancing, each in their own way. The mother experiences the opening to, and holding within, of the child; the child experiences being received and held – and they each experience the relationship itself, which, one might say, embraces them both simultaneously in its turn.

As in the discussion of acceptance, there is the caveat that embrace does not necessarily signify approval; as suggested in an earlier footnote, how many times have mothers embraced children who have behaved disgracefully? We may as well ask: how many stars are in the sky? And, again, this distinction between embrace and approval need not be limited to embraces involving only people. Consider the patriot who passionately embraces their country, while strenuously decrying many of its policies. Consider the artist who produces a work which they recognize as flawed, but which they can’t bear to discard. They may not ever show it to the world, but it is dear to them in a way which their heart must honor. Consider the devotee, who embraces their deity even as they are wracked with anguish and despair as their destiny unfolds in ways which seem to be the exact opposite of all they had earnestly prayed for. Though there may be pain, disappointment and heartbreak, whenever there is authentic embrace, the three-part event of inclusiveness is played out once again in the arena of human lives.

Of course, happily enough, there is often no incongruity between embrace and approval. Consider, for example, the man who, in looking at the tree in front of him, finds himself approving of every leaf, branch, twig, and molecule of that tree; finds that there is something within him which reaches out with “both arms” - even though he may be standing yards away - and somehow admits that tree into his heart. And he then leans back into the realization that the tree and himself have, in this moment of embrace, become something shining, unique and beautiful in the universe.

Authentic embrace is a potent emotional, psychological and spiritual event. It is, in our representation here, one of the three vital aspects of love. And, just as acceptance tends to flow into embrace, embrace in its turn, when it is pure and uncompromised, tends to pour itself inevitably into . . .

Celebration

CELEBRATION! THE VERY WORD ITSELF evokes a feeling of excitement; of something special, deserving, worthy. And this is as it should be, for we need such a word to describe the quintessential, culminating, ecstatic component of the experience of love. This is the peak experience which, given the tendencies of human nature, is often pursued with such single-minded drive that the underlying tender foundations of love - the elements of acceptance and embrace, if you will - get lost in the compelling drama and excitement of the quest for the celebratory “high.” Then suddenly we look around and find that, as Elton John put it, “love lies bleeding in our hand” - in our insistent eagerness we have trampled to death the very thing we so urgently sought.

The Buddhists would assert that this is because we have it backwards; that we’re starting at the end, where the excitement lies, and hoping in this way to readily grasp the entire experience of fulfillment for which we hunger. Buddhists would have us devote our whole attention to the first constituent in our trilogy of aspects of love - acceptance - and dwell there so persistently and absolutely that, eventually, embrace, and then celebration, will emerge just as naturally and inexorably as spring and then summer unfold themselves out of the spareness of winter.

The Buddhists would be right, of course, as they so often are. But their discipline is a severe one, and most of us are less stringent in the conduct of our lives. Still, love is all around us, just waiting to be realized, and there are few of us who fail to experience love in any degree - including the feelings of specialness and excitement which make up the celebration aspect of love. And, as we found also with respect to the dimensions of acceptance and embrace, to be on the receiving end of this event of celebration feeds, affirms and sustains us emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. This is manifestly true for humans; could it be true for trees as well? I don’t know, but I’ll close this essay with two quotes from the exquisite poet Mary Oliver, whose work is, in my experience, one continuous surge of love. First, regarding trees -

Through these woods I have walked thousands of times. For many years I felt more at home here than anywhere else, including our own house. Stepping out into the world, into the grass, onto the path, was always a kind of relief. I was not

escaping anything. I was returning to the arena of delight. I was stepping across some border. I don't mean just that the world changed on the other side of the border, but that I did too. Eventually I began to appreciate - I don't say this lightly - that the great black oaks knew me. I don't mean that they knew me as myself and not another - that kind of individualism was not in the air - but that they recognized and responded to my presence, and to my mood. They began to offer, or I began to feel them offer, their serene greeting. It was like a quick change of temperature, a warm and comfortable flush, faint yet palpable, as I walked toward them and beneath their outflowing branches.

And what is it like to be “in love;” that is, to inhabit a state of being, of consciousness, such that love is the natural and reflexive relationship that one has with all that there is – even my Kleenex box, for example? Again, from Mary Oliver:

. . . the world makes a great distinction between kinds of life: human on the one hand, all else on the other hand. Or it throws everything into two categories: animate, and inanimate. Which are neither of them distinctions I care about. The world is made up of cats, and cattle, and fenceposts! A chair is alive. The blue bowl of the pond, and the blue bowl on the table, that holds six apples, are all animate, and have spirits. The coat, the paper clip, the shovel, as well as the lively rain-dappled grass, and the thrush singing his gladness, and the rain itself. What are divisions for, if you look into it, but to lay out a stratification – that is, to suggest where an appreciative or not so appreciative response is proper, to each of the many parts of our indivisible world?

What I want to describe in my poems is the nudge, the prick of the instant, the flame of appreciation that shoots from my heels to my head when compass grass bends its frilled branches and draws a perfect circle on the cold sand; or when the yellow wasp comes, in fall, to my wrist and then to my plate, to ramble the edges of a smear of honey.

There is nothing special in this, I know. Neither does it prove anything. But living like this is for me the difference between a luminous life and a ho-hum life. So be it! With my whole heart, I live as I live.

Mary Oliver – so in love with life that she couldn't be an addict if she tried. May we learn from her, from the world, from one another, from within ourselves, how to dwell in this state of indiscriminate acceptance, embrace, and celebration.