

I Still Love You

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I begin this morning with Yankee Magazine's "Best Love Story of 1997."

Twelve feet or so off the edge of State Road 103, which runs through the small town of Newbury, New Hampshire there sits a squarish, flat brown-gray slab of rock roughly the height of a man.

About 25 years ago, across from the rock, there sat a tidy, cedar-shingled house in whose backyard a dozen chickens pecked about. Their eggs made breakfasts (and a tiny sideline business) for a family named the Rules -- whose daughter Gretchen was pretty, smart, wistful, and 16.

There was a shy boy, also wistful, also a farmer, whose name is forgotten today. He pined for Gretchen Rule. He cast about awkwardly for ways to tell her or show her...then he hit upon the rock. One moonlit night, he secretly wrote on it, in eight-inch high, spray-painted letters, "CHICKEN FARMER, I LOVE YOU. " And the girl *must* have seen it, and possibly even guessed the author, but nothing came of it.

The message endured for years, though brambles grew up to obscure it, and the letters, once so bold and white, began to fade. Gretchen Rule went away to Harvard, then on to life. The boy, whoever he was -- or is -- became a man. The rock grew into a relic, a love note out of time.

One night - ten, perhaps 12 years ago, the brambles were mysteriously cut away and the message was repainted and renewed: "CHICKEN FARMER, I *STILL* LOVE YOU," it proclaimed. And every two years or so, barely noticed, the letters would be freshened and the brambles cut away.

Then, in April of 1997, an unknown caller complained of "graffiti" to the Dept. of Transportation. By nightfall the same day, a three-foot square of rust-colored primer was all that was left of a shy boy's long-ago love. A week passed, and a new sun rose on New Hampshire's stubbornest love: "CHICKEN FARMER, I *STILL* LOVE YOU." But bolder this time: thicker-lettered, almost crude, and defiantly painted rather than sprayed.

In Newbury, the inspired townspeople took up a "Petition for the Status Quo" to protect their landmark. The government responded with a letter, promising that the Chicken Rock's message would be forever safe. And it is.

Now, to be sure, a veritable wellspring of sermons could erupt from this charming tale. Yet, the theme that has emerged most clearly for me, like broad white paint strokes on a granite slab, has to do with that old love which we've already experienced and known in each of our lives, and how this old love, defiant and resilient, even in the face of loss, can carry us forward along the twisting roadways ahead.

First, I'll tell you that one unromantic skeptic with whom I've shared the story of the Chicken Rock suggests that the farmer was downright pathetic to pine endlessly like he did for Gretchen Rule. But I disagree. In fact, I propose that despite the Chicken Rock, or actually, in light of it, its far more likely that the farmer went on to love again. In my view, it is just too simplistic and too cynical to presume that because he continues to affirm, "Chicken Farmer, I Still Love You"... that he is stuck in some miserable time warp of unrequited affection.

No, I don't think he's pathetic. I think he's brave. Because the truth is that it requires remarkable courage and faith for him, for us, to remember and affirm love. Not only the farmer's wistful, romantic variety, but, even more so, in cases when the love is embodied by someone cherished who has died or from whom we've become estranged in a broken or thwarted relationship.

Reconnecting with old love takes courage because it often means reconnecting with old pain, loss, grief, disappointment, or anger, and this is a tough expedition over rough terrain, which many of us, including myself, have experienced.

Yet, even as we love and lose and hurt, we might also learn that the only way to avoid loss is to avoid attachments, but that to do so is to avoid life, or at least a truly human life. If we shun close relationships, or never let ourselves care deeply for another because of the pain of past love, we may succeed in avoiding the suffering of parting and loss. But we might also miss out on carrying some of the strength of old love forward into new relationships and challenges. The shy farmer with his defiant and affirming love note could inspire us to believe this.

Sadly, not all the people in our pasts have loved us the way the boy loved Gretchen, or the way we deserve to be loved. There is no sentimental journey down bumpy roads pitted by the crushed rock of neglect or abuse. Sometimes, disengagement equals self care and right relationship means no visible bond at all. Yet, when it is safe for us to summon our courage to remember both the joy and the pain of love, we unlock the deepest meaning of the beatitude: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

As we conjure up the face of someone we've loved, or someone who has loved us - a parent or grandparent, a partner, a wise teacher, a child, a friend, or "the one who got away" - we might ponder what he or she has meant to us; what she taught us; what he saw in us and hoped for us; why he forgave us; the joy she brought us; how he loved us or loves us still. Over time, we can experience healing and cleansing and comfort. Our broken hearts can heal open and love can pour out.

And, through it all, when human relationships disappoint us, as they sometimes do; when despair threatens joy like a swath of rust-colored primer, we can turn to the oldest, most rock-solid love of all -- *agape*, the universal and unconditional love that persists even when no love is reciprocated. Regardless of our differing theologies, I'd like to believe that on the byways of our imperfect lives, the sacred presence of *agape* marks the route at regular intervals with its empowering, boldly-painted reminder, "You are accepted...I Still Love You...and I always will, infinitely."

The late Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox has written: "Maybe love doesn't die, is not obliterated by hurts or anger. Maybe love is not wasted or silly, or found to be something other than love...Oh, my dear, do not despair that love has come and gone. Although we are broken, the love that spills out of us has joined the love that circles the world and makes it blessed."

This morning, may we pause for a moment to remember old love, both human and divine, that spills over from the past and blesses us; whether it be love that proclaims itself stubbornly in rustproof paint, love that is merely a relic, or love obscured by the brambles of pain.

And, in doing so, may we each hear these soul-nurturing words, in the voices of our individual choosing, and may they strengthen us along the way:

"Oh my dear, do not despair. I *Still* Love You."

Amen.