

“Hug Her,” said a woman in the crowd

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In his book, *Jailbird*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. gives us one of his quirky but poignant vignettes of a street person named Mary Kathleen O’Looney who surrounds a long-lost love named Walter in a busy city plaza. She encircles him with shopping bags and takes hold of his wrist. She will not lower her voice. “Now that I’ve found you, I’ll never let you go. Look me in the eye, Walter,” she says, “you used to tell me all the time how much you loved me. Were you just lying to me?”

Vonnegut notes how this kind of melodrama always draws a crowd. And sure enough, people surround them in the plaza. “Some people were crying,” so the story goes. “I myself was about to cry,” admits the narrator. “Hug her,” said a woman in the crowd. “I did so,” he writes. “I found myself embracing a bundle of dry twigs that was wrapped in rags. That was when I began to cry myself.”

Vonnegut’s story transports us into a fertile landscape laden with emotional land-mines. This moving tale of a “bundle of dry twigs wrapped in rags” and the man she yearns to hug leads us to a few basic, but crucial, questions. In your heart of hearts, you’ll each know how these questions pertain to your individual lives, if at all.

- What do you think “love” is?

- Are you willing to treat your intimate partner as beloved?

- When it is hardest to love, will you strive to love harder?

- Will you allow fear and pride, anger and unhealthy behavior patterns to keep you from the hug that might be waiting just on the other side of these self-imposed barriers?

“Open your arms if you want to be held,” the poet Rumi instructs us. What might it take for you to do this very healing thing with a current or future partner?

Arguably, the most famous laundry list about “love” appears in St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament. This idealized, but wise, view of love is, not surprisingly, one of the most popular readings for wedding ceremonies. Of course, if this list came with step-by-step, easy-to-follow instructions, we’d likely see a drop in the need for marital counseling, in domestic abuse cases, and in the demoralizing divorce rate.

Many of us know these words well: “Love is patient; love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Gulp!

Although this definition appears hopelessly simplistic and unattainable, Paul gives us a love that is a revolutionary act! And, like all revolutionary acts, this love of Paul’s requires elbow grease and discipline. He never claims it will be a breeze; and I can attest after nearly twenty years of marriage, that it isn’t. There has been many-a-time that the last thing I wanted to do was give my partner a hug...and visa versa.

Paul’s love is an abiding love which recognizes that although affection and passion may ebb and flow, commitment and compassion can remain steadfast. It is spiritual union. It’s a love for grown-ups. A love which, when actualized, withstands the baser instincts that cause us humans to act from arrogance and envy, impatience and nastiness, even with the people we claim to cherish the most. It’s a love that asks us to get out of the way. In its most fearless form, it is a dangerous and unfashionable love.

INTERLUDE: While Love is Unfashionable -- Alice Walker

While love is unfashionable

let us live

unfashionably.

Seeing the world

a complex ball

in small hands;

*love our blackest garment.
Let us be poor
in all but truth, and courage
handed down
by the old spirits.
Let us be intimate with
ancestral ghosts
and music
of the undead.*

*While love is dangerous
let us walk bareheaded
beside the great River.
Let us gather blossoms
under fire.*

“Let us be poor in all but truth and courage,” Alice Walker encourages us. “Love endures all things,” writes Paul. “Hug her,” said a woman in the crowd. And I’m remembering now how this command in Vonnegut’s story comes after Mary Kathleen, desperate for some connection and reassurance, has cried out, “You used to tell me how much you loved me, Walter...were you just lying to me?” Her words spring from the page and pierce our hearts. How well some of us know her anguish.

Surely, not all relationships are salvageable no matter how hard we love or how bravely we keep at it. I realize that. If you’ve struggled and been wounded in an unhealthy relationship that has ended, my heart is with you. If you are suffering now, my heart is with you. If you are not in a relationship and are lonely, my heart is with you. Try to hear my words in the context of future possibilities.

In certain cases, disengagement does equal self care and right relationship means no visible bond at all. Absolutely. As the journalist Mark Matousek suggests, “Sometimes you walk a mile with someone and that’s all you get. A single mile, not five, and not the lifelong journey you’d hoped for; just a bounded stretch of road to share before it forks.

We wish this didn’t have to be, but since it does, what can we do but savor the mile, remember it well, and leave it with grace?” Some relationships end, and it’s for the best. There are times, however, when we do feel safe enough to reinvest in our partnerships, despite past disappointments or challenges ahead. In a fable from the Hasidic tradition, a discouraged man tells his Rabbi, “The feeling of love I have for my wife comes and goes. I used to love her more. What should I do?”

“Love her,” responds the Rabbi.

“But you don’t understand,” pleads the man, “the feeling of love just isn’t there sometimes.”

“Yes, I understand,” says the Rabbi, “if the feeling isn’t there, that’s a good reason to love her.”

“But, how do you love when you don’t love? When you’re angry or resentful?”

“Love is a verb,” answers the Rabbi. “It is choice. So, love her. Listen to her. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?”

“I want to,” admits the man, “but I am so afraid.”

INTERLUDE: Psalm 3 - modern translation

*O Beloved, how numerous are my fears!
They rise up within me whispering
there is no help for you in Love.*

*Yet You, O my Beloved, radiate around me,
my glory
lifting my head high.
I cry aloud to You,
and You answer within my heart.*

*I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, for my Beloved
holds me with strength
and tenderness.*

*I shall withstand all my fears
as they arise within me.*

Rise up, Love!

“O, Beloved, how numerous are my fears,” cries the Psalmist. What is it we fear in our relationships? Loss of control? betrayal? being totally exposed to our partner? closing ourselves off to other prospects? Are we afraid that we are essentially unlovable so we write a script that validates our fear?

The way I see it, a vital relationship is not meant to be like a ship safe in a harbor. There is danger built into it because a mature partnership bars the easy way out or the quick fix. It must set out on the open sea. It demands change and compromise, the ability to struggle, to endure, to grow together, and to forgive.

But our fears hold us back, and surely, some of these fears are valid. Perhaps, we’ve wanted to hug or be hugged by our partner and we’ve been met repeatedly with a coolness that has closed down our hearts little by little. We’ve been punished instead of sheltered; we’ve withheld rather than abided.

“Sometimes fate and circumstance break our hearts open and give us a kind of window to wisdom and courage, and we become more compassionate and caring and brave, in spite of ourselves. We shed some of our ego and gain a kind of humility that lets us see as we have not seen before. Or, we can take the approach of Maggid of Mezeritch, the Hasidic leader, who said, “If your heart is not open, treat it like a door. Break it down.” (Marilyn Sewall)

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who died just this past week, gives us as eloquent a description of open-hearted partnership as we might find. This is somewhat ironic since her autobiographies reveal the cold marriage she endured with an emotionally aloof husband. One can imagine that she ached for the graceful dance between partners, who, in her words, “moved to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it.”

“The joy of such a pattern,” she wrote, “is not only the joy of creation or the joy of participation. It is also the joy of living in the moment... There is no place for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand.” Lindbergh is right on target. A loving hug given in trust and openness carries a different quality of connection than grab and clutch and cling. It is, as the poet Marge Piercy defines it, “To Have Without Holding.”

INTERLUDE: To Have Without Holding - Marge Piercy

*Learning to love differently is hard,
love with the hands wide open, love
with the doors banging on the hinges,
the cupboard 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.*

How well some of us know the pain of loving wide open. Especially if we've attempted it and had our hearts stomped on. Even so, loving wide open is the true path to the beloved, and it is doable. To stretch the muscles; to thwart the reflexes of grab, of clutch, of withdrawal; to love with minimized malice.

Piercy summarizes the "how-to" portion of this equation well when she describes the process as one of loving "consciously, conscientiously, concretely, constructively." What might these adverbs mean to you personally in your individual relationships? Loving consciously? loving concretely? loving constructively? Yes, it will be dangerous. Yes, it will be challenging. And, yes, it may lead to a depth of intimacy and union you've never experienced before or dreamt was possible.

INTERLUDE: The Sunrise Ruby -- Rumi

*In the early morning hour,
just before dawn, lover and beloved wake
and take a drink of water.*

*She asks, "Do you love me or yourself more?
Really, tell the absolute truth."*

*He says, "There's nothing left of me.
I'm like a ruby held up to the sunrise.
Is it still a stone, or a world
made of redness? It has no resistance
to sunlight."*

*This is how Hallaj said, I am God,
and told the truth!*

*The ruby and the sunrise are one.
Be courageous and discipline yourself.*

*Completely become hearing and ear,
and wear this sun-ruby as an earring.*

*Work. Keep digging your well.
Don't think about getting off from work.
Water is there somewhere.*

*Submit to a daily practice.
Your loyalty to that
is a ring on the door.*

*Keep knocking, and the joy inside
will eventually open a window
and look out to see who's there.*

The ruby and the sunrise are one," writes Rumi. "Be courageous and discipline yourself." There's that word, "courage," again. The courage to hug, the courage to abide, the courage to love yourself and your partner. And it's worth the effort to marshal your bravery because your fear and your ego and your pride will not keep you warm at night. Love and only love will shatter the barriers between you and your partner.

Only love blended with courage, honesty, and discipline will lead to spiritual union and covenant. You will invite the sacred into your partnership, which in turn, will allow you...no!, *require* you to feel compassion, to empathize, to experience the joy perched over the windowsill of your heart.

In her poem entitled, "The Hug," Tess Gallagher reminds us of what we often yearn for in our most intimate relationships, but which we inadvertently push away through fear or pride or by not loving consciously.

"So I walk over to him," she writes,
" and put my arms around him and
try to hug him like I mean it...
I put my head into his chest and snuggle in.
I lean into him.
I lean my blood and my wishes into him.
He stands for it.
This is his and he's starting to give it back so well
I know he's getting it.
This hug.
So truly, so tenderly we stop having arms..."

"Clearly, a little permission is a dangerous thing," Gallagher continues.

"But when you hug someone,
you want it to be a masterpiece of connection,
the way the button on his coat
will leave the imprint of a planet in my cheek when I walk away.

When I try to find someplace to go back to.”

So, if you can, give permission. Create a masterpiece. Love with the doors banging on their hinges. Glow on the street like a neon raspberry. Gather blossoms under fire.

Open your arms if you want to be held.

“Hug her”...”Hug him”... said a woman in the crowd.