

All Loved Up

Story:

When I was eleven and my older sister was 18, on Feb 14th – the date is etched forever in my mind – she received 18 valentine's cards in the post. They lay there on the door mat – I was the first one to reach the door mat and I remember well my feelings as I bent down to pick them up. I'd like to tell you that I was thrilled for my sister, happy for her popularity, but I was not – I was jealous, horribly jealous – not a nice feeling, but it's one we probably all know in one form or another. To be human is to feel jealous from time to time

So this year, just in case you didn't get as many Valentine's Cards as you might have wished we've made some special love messages for everyone. And the good thing is that if you don't like the message you have received you can swap it for another one (*children handed out quotations to everyone*).

Address:

I met a friend called Kate the other day – we've known each other since we were in our twenties – I used to baby-sit for her children. She has four children, well four daughters to be precise. And they don't need babysitting anymore. They are all now in their late teens or twenties and when I asked Kate how they were she smiled and said 'Sarah, they're all loved up'. Clearly I don't listen to the right music or read the right magazines because I'd never heard this phrase 'all loved up' before - but it means what it sounds like – Kate's daughters are all passionately in love, romance is in the air.

And romance has been in the air this week as Valentine's Day was celebrated on Tuesday – a wonderful marketing opportunity for manufacturers of cards, chocolates, not to mention the red rose growers. I know it's just a bit of fun but there's something in me that deeply dislikes what I regard as cynical marketing ploys. Call me a killjoy but I could argue that Valentine's Day spreads potentially dangerous falsehoods. It's a day dedicated to romantic love, a day dedicated to couples. It spreads a falsehood that people have to be in couples in order to be truly happy. It spreads a falsehood that romantic love is something special and to be sought out in life and encouraged.

But romantic love by its very nature is a romance, a fiction. The words origins come from an old French word meaning hypothetical. Romantic love depends on illusion in order to occur in the first place – when two people fall in love they cannot fully know the other person – what they fall in love with is at least partly a projection of themselves. There's no denying the deliciousness of such moments in life, the heart racing, the colour coming to your cheeks, the delight of togetherness and the agony of being parted, the sheer joy and pleasure of being alive. And it doesn't last, it cannot last. Romantic love has to transmute itself – be that transmutation into a more mature realistic love for another human being or into disappointment when the truth starts to emerge and a real human being stands before us, frail and flawed.

It is said, and I have no way of knowing if it is true, that the Inuit people living in the Arctic Circle have 23 different names for snow. They need to have 23 different words for snow because they get a lot of snow and it is very important to them so they have to be able to differentiate between the various types and qualities. Here in Britain we have various words for rain since we get such a lot of it – we have rain and showers and drizzle and downpours. But we only seem to have one word for love in the English language and we spread it round so many different uses, perhaps lessening the power of such a powerful concept.

The Greek language has a number of words for love and certainly separates romantic love from the love that is at the centre of existence, the love that is beyond the individual. The Greek word for that is agape and this is how Martin Luther King Jnr described agape:

"it is understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill to all of humanity. Agape is an overflowing love, which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say it is the love of God operating in the human heart. When you rise to love on this level, you love all people, not because you like them, nor because their ways appeal to you, but you love them because God loves them."

What other types of love might we want to differentiate? How could we best name the feelings and attitudes and behaviours connected with for example, the love of parents for children, the love of friends for one another, the love for a new lover and the love for a partner of forty years or more? What about our love of music and the arts? And what about the natural world? How shall we best categorise and describe our love for the robin who greets us in the garden, the landscape that lifts our spirits, what do we feel when we look at an image of our sparkling blue planet photographed from space? A few years ago I ran a workshop about love for a group of Unitarians and we spoke of the many loves in our lives. One person described with tears in his eyes how he had spent the previous day out in Derbyshire, in the Peak District, at a stone circle called the Nine Ladies on Stanton Moor. There was a plan to create a quarry very close to the stone circle, to quarry aggregates that are used in road building. He described meeting the protesters who had built themselves a protest camp in the nearby trees and who were determined to bring the planning proposal to everyone's attention and to do all that they could to prevent the destruction of a unique landscape. That's a fierce kind of love, that fights for what it believes to be right, but then love is far from soft and sweet and slushy; love is tough and demanding if it is any sort of love worth having.

Listen to these words again from Kahlil Gibran

"for even as love is for your growth so is he for your pruning. Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun, so shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth."

Powerful images – a far cry from a '20% off boxes of chocolates and bottles of champagne at Tesco's' kind of love.

This is love at its transformational level, love that may shake us and shock us but that inspires us to be greater beings than we have hereto been. Perhaps most importantly this transformational love shatters any illusion we might have about our separateness from the great sea of existence. This love is not a dualistic emotion, its essence is unity, oneness with all that is, not just with a love object, a chosen one, that then excludes all others. And yet love also encompasses the opposite – a reverence for the otherness of that which is loved, a healthy awareness of and appreciation of difference and of the space between – how delightfully paradoxical.

So let's describe ourselves if we wish as 'all loved up' this week – in love with ourselves, in love with all peoples of the world, all beings of the world, in love with our planet, in love with life itself and who knows, we may then find that we have discovered fire once more in understanding the huge power of this one word – love. And then – well then it really doesn't matter how many Valentine's Cards we've received!

Sung Benediction:

May the long time sun shine on you, all love surround you and the pure light within you guide your way home.