

THE COURAGE TO SURRENDER EVER-MORE-DEEPLY INTO LOVE

Falling in love is usually considered to be a temporary stage in a relationship. It is presumed to be based on a certain suspension of reality testing in which the partner's imperfections are not seen, since they are obscured by an unrealistic idealized image that is projected onto the partner. It is further presumed that this phase will pass once this projection is withdrawn, and the challenge is to accomplish this withdrawal as soon as possible in order to get down to the business of living with the reality of the imperfect person with whom one has fallen in love.

However, there is another possibility. Perhaps what is seen in the idealized image of the partner is in fact some glimpse into some deeper part of them, perhaps their soul, that is inherently beautiful and loveable. From this point of view there is no projection that needs to be withdrawn. Instead there is a vision of a deeper reality, a vision that needs to be remembered and nurtured rather than discarded. In this way falling deeply in love calls for the same thing that any other visionary experience one is lucky enough to have, whether spontaneous and unbidden or diligently pursued through spiritual practices and sacrifice. It calls for a surrender to the power of the experience and an intentional effort to remember and nurture this power.

Of course, not every falling in love is a true visionary experience. One can simply be infatuated with someone, even someone one has never even met. What is diagnostic of a true visionary falling in love is the shared experience. If both parties feel overwhelmed by the love they feel for the other, then it is much more likely that what is going on is more than infatuation.

To allow yourself to be vulnerable enough to fall very deeply in love, and then to tell the object of that love the depth of your feelings, requires a certain something. It may be courage, foolhardiness, fearlessness, faith, recklessness, naivete, mania, intellectual limitation, enlightenment, or some combination of these and other factors. The combination may be different if the object of one's deep love is an incarnate human being versus a purely spiritual being. Clarissa Pinkola Estes speaks eloquently about how this very deep love is usually a frightening experience that is much more powerful than what one was expecting from the experience of falling in love.

After the falling in love comes the nurturing and deepening of love. It seems to me that the best way to approach this process is through making an explicit agreement as a couple to try to make each partner feel loved and safe. This involves an ongoing process of asking your partner to teach you what he or she needs from you in order to feel loved and safe, and to teach your partner what he or she needs to know about you in order to be able to make you feel loved and safe.ⁱ What one needs in order to feel safe and loved will change over time, so that the learning and teaching process goes on forever.

The same "certain something(s)" that were required to tolerate the vulnerability to fall in love and express it in the first place are probably required to accomplish the ongoing nurturing and deepening of love. In addition, nurturing deep love requires ignoring those

who would try to convince you that you are just in the early “honeymoon stage” of your love relationship, a stage that will inevitably have to be replaced by something more realistic and less exciting and magical. You may also be told that your desire to maintain an exciting and magical love relationship is a manifestation of your immaturity, clinginess, unmet dependency needs, unacknowledged lust, and/or attachment disorder. If you are unconsciously feeling the fear described by Clarissa Pinkola Estes you may also be telling yourself these things.

If you manage to ignore the cynics (including your own inner cynic that is driven by fear) and embark on a lifelong effort to nurture and deepen a love relationship you will inevitably experience pain, both as the receiver and the inflictor. This pain can be a result of anything from a forgotten special occasion to infidelityⁱⁱ and always invites a closing of the heart by both inflictor and receiver in order avoid the feeling fully the pain involved. This closing of the heart is usually accomplished by denying, repressing, dismissing, or at least diluting the intensity of the deep love that had previously been felt. In this way one essentially joins the ranks of the cynics noted above. The receiver does not want to feel the direct pain that was inflicted, and the inflictor does not want to feel the pain of guilt and remorse for having hurt his or her beloved. In addition, the inflictor does not want to feel the beloved’s pain, which is immediately obvious and available for the inflictor to feel because of the deep love connection with the beloved. Pulling back from the felt deep love is the obvious solution for both inflictor and receiver in order to avoid feeling the pain. Refraining from pulling back is the challenge to those who want to continue to nurture and deepen the love relationship.

The inflictor’s asking for forgiveness, and the receiver’s sincerely granting it, will be required to repair the damage and to make it possible to continue on the journey of deepening the love relationship. The granting of forgiveness is usually only meaningful when the inflictor makes a commitment to avoiding inflicting pain again. This commitment may require learning more about what makes the Beloved actually feel safe and loved, and it may also require a deep examination by the inflictor of any motives, conscious or unconscious, to inflict pain. Interestingly enough, the Beloved, who has been injured, may be in a unique and powerful position to help the inflictor understand the motive for having inflicted pain. While lovers cannot be each other’s psychotherapist, they can be psychotherapeutic to each other in a profound sense because of the way that their deep connection allows them to see parts of their Beloved’s unconscious process. They may then be able to provide their Beloved with some feedback about any such unconscious process, thereby helping the Beloved bring this process into conscious awareness and to refrain acting it out again.

Some examination of conscious and unconscious processes may also be required of the receiver of the pain. At times the receiver may exaggerate the intensity and significance of their reported pain in order to manipulate the inflictor through guilt. Trying to induce indebtedness or loyalty through guilt is obviously a result of the fear that one is not worthy of being loved for one’s own sake. This fear may need to be brought into conscious awareness and addressed directly. Like any other fear, it can then be used to teach the Beloved how to love one better so that one will not experience this fear anymore. Similarly,

pain may be inflicted by behaviors that could be expected to engender jealousy, like flirting with others, because of the inflictor's fear of being abandoned. Making a partner feel jealous can be an attempt, whether conscious or unconscious, to cause the partner to feel lucky to have you and therefore less likely to leave you. Again, the fear that one is not good enough to keep the partner's interest without such manipulation needs to be addressed directly.

The importance of having an explicit agreement to teach one's partner how to be loving and avoid inflicting pain can be very important as a guard against certain defense mechanisms against feeling the power of the love relationship. In the absence of such an agreement to teach and learn about better ways to love the teaching may be misinterpreted. If it not understood and agreed that feedback will be given about things that your partner has done that have caused you pain, your feedback may be interpreted as evidence that you are simply oversensitive or that you are overcritical of your partner. Either of these interpretations can then be used as an excuse to withdraw from the intimacy of the relationship, or even to withdraw from the relationship altogether.

It is theoretically possible to engage in this deepening process of love without an explicit agreement to teach and learn. A woman once told me that she was sure she should marry her fiancé in spite of the fact that other men who were more intelligent (closer to her high level of intelligence) more handsome, and richer, were clearly interested in her. She reported that her certainty came from the way in which her fiancé always listened carefully when she told him that he had hurt her, asked questions for clarification, and then made ever effort to avoid hurting her in that way again.

Many couples make an attempt to "keep the romance alive." While this is a worthwhile goal, something much more powerful is possible. This powerful something is deeply rewarding and can also be deeply frightening, especially early in a relationship, because of its power. If lovers can successful fulfill their commitment to continue teach their partner how to be a better lover, and to continue to be open to their partner's teaching them how to be a better lover, then indeed love can flourish. The attitude behind such commitments is perhaps captured by the prayer, "Lord, make me an instrument of your love." It may also be reflected in [quote from Jesus in The Magic Tarot]

One place where a successful engagement with this endless teaching/learning process is manifested is in lovemaking. The partners in a couple who are using this process to deepen their love will tend to find themselves surrendering more deeply to the passion of lovemaking and also lingering longer in the afterglow of lovemaking, sometimes weeping tears of gratitude for what they have with each other.

In some ways learning and teach how to love may be similar to simply learning and teaching how to be kind. However, in the context of an ever-deepening passionate love relationship, it has much more immediate gratification.

ⁱ Of course if you have a relationship with God, Khrishna, Jesus, a Shamanic ally, or any other spiritual entity, you can also ask that entity to teach you how to better love your human partner.

ⁱⁱ If the beloved is a purely spiritual being there is a particular dynamic involved with the pain. Whether the spiritual being is regarded as a monotheistic Supreme Being, or some lower level diety or saint-like figure, it is usually assumed that your love relationship with that being will provide you some kind of protection from life's suffering. Then when tragedy strikes, you feel betrayed or abandoned and are tempted to pull back from the intensity of the love relationship with this being, just as you might pull back from another incarnate human who had betrayed and hurt you. While books like "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" make the case that the spiritual being is not really responsible for your suffering, this logic has little effect on the emotion-driven impulse to pull back.

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