

“The Psychology of Romantic Love”
March 25, 2007
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Poetry in Order of Service

Always you were the reason for my existence;
To adore you for me was religion ...

It is the story of a love
Like unto which there is no equal,
Which made me understand
All that is good, all that is bad;
That gave light to my life,
Extinguishing it afterwards ...
Oh! What a darkened life!
Without your love I cannot live.
(Carlos Almarain, “*Histora de un amor*”)

Call to Worship

This day is a new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together,
giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

We are travelers. We meet for a moment in this sacred place to love, to share, to serve. Let us use compassion, curiosity, reverence, and respect while seeking our truths. In this way we will support a just and joyful community, and this moment shall endure.

Responsive Reading:

MINISTER: This house is for the ingathering of nature and human nature.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle.

MINISTER: It is a house of freedom, guarding the dignity and worth of every person.

CONGREGATION: It offers a platform for the free voice, for declaring, both in times of security and danger, the full and undivided conflict of opinions.

MINISTER: It is a house of truth-seeking, where scientists can encourage devotion to their quest, where mystics can abide in a community of searchers.

CONGREGATION: It is a house of art, adorning its celebrations with melodies and handiworks.

MINISTER: It is a house of prophecy, outrunning times past and times present in visions of growth and progress.

CONGREGATION: This house is a cradle for our dreams, the workshop of our common endeavor.

Reading

This morning's sermon will be the fifth in a series on the books and ideas of Robert A. Johnson, an author and psychologist whose psychological approach is related to the work of the 20th century Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung. Today I will speak about themes from what I regard as one of his most interesting, provocative, and important books, namely, We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love. This is a book that views romantic love in the broad sweep of things as well as indicating what it can mean to us in our time. My reading consists of several paragraphs from the introduction of this book:

Romantic love is the single greatest energy system in the Western psyche. In our culture it has supplanted religion as the arena in which men and women seek meaning, transcendence, wholeness, and ecstasy.

As a mass phenomenon, romantic love is peculiar to the West. We are so accustomed to living with the beliefs and assumptions of romantic love that we think it is the only form of "love" on which marriage or love relationships can be based. We think it is the only "true love." But there is much that we can learn from the East about this. In Eastern cultures, like those of India, we find that married couples love each other with great warmth, often with a stability and devotion that puts us to shame. But their love is not "romantic love" as we know it. They don't impose the same ideals on their relationships, nor do they impose such impossible demands and expectations on each other as we do....

Romantic love has existed throughout history in many cultures. We find it in the literature of ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, ancient Persia, and feudal Japan. But our modern Western society is the only culture in history that has experienced romantic love as a mass phenomenon. We are the only society that makes romance the basis of our marriages and love relationships and the cultural ideal of "true love."

The ideal of romantic love burst into Western society during the Middle Ages. It first appeared in our literature in the myth of Tristan and Iseult, then in the love poems and songs of the troubadours. It was called "courtly love"; its model was the

brave knight who worshiped a fair lady as his inspiration, the symbol of all beauty and perfection, the ideal that moved him to be noble, spiritual, refined, and high-minded. In our time we have mixed courtly love into our sexual relationships and marriages, but we still hold the medieval belief that true love has to be the ecstatic adoration of a man or woman who carries, for us, the image of perfection.

Carl Jung has shown that when a great psychological phenomenon suddenly appears in the life of an individual, it represents a tremendous unconscious potential that is rising to the level of consciousness. The same is true for a culture. At a certain point in the history of a people, a new possibility bursts out of the collective unconscious; it is a new idea, a new belief, a new value, or a new way of looking at the universe. It represents a potential good if it can be integrated into consciousness, but at first it is overwhelming, even destructive.

Romantic love is one of these truly overwhelming psychological phenomena that have appeared in Western history. It has overwhelmed our collective psyche and permanently altered our view of the world. As a society, we have not yet learned to handle the tremendous power of romantic love. We turn it into tragedy and alienation more often than into enduring human relationships. But, I believe, if men and women will understand the psychological dynamics behind romantic love and learn to handle them consciously, they will find a new possibility of relationship, both to themselves and to others.

(Robert Johnson, We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love, excerpts from pp. xi-xiv)

“THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ROMANTIC LOVE”

Introduction

My sermon this morning will be an attempt to present Robert Johnson’s main ideas about the nature and dynamics of romantic love.

When I first encountered his ideas on romantic love over twenty years ago, I found them to be quite different from anything I had considered before, also quite challenging, thoughts that forever changed my approach to the subject. In re-reading his main book on this subject this past week, I still find his approach to the subject to be both challenging and interesting – and also helpful.

Whether or not you will find that to be the case, I can’t, of course, say. But my object in this sermon, as with the others in this series, is, first of all, simply to try to put his ideas before you as a means of enlarging and deepening your encounter with this wild and woolly reality that we find ourselves a part of.

The backdrop to Johnson’s approach to romantic love

To understand Johnson’s ideas on romantic love, I’m going to start at what may seem some distance from the subject, namely, with his understanding that reality does not consist only of what we are consciously aware of or only of what is material in nature.

For Johnson, reality – and perhaps this word should be capitalized, because, as he says, “if this [reality] is not God I have no idea of what is” (p. 54 Owning Your Own Shadow) – in addition to its material side, which can be grasped by the senses, also has a non-material side to it that cannot be seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelled, or measured.

Nevertheless, for Johnson, this non-material side of reality is every bit as real as the material side (though, of course, in the West we don’t give them the same weight, even denying that there is a non-material side to reality.)

There is no way in language to adequately address the non-material side of reality (or to speak of the totality of “what is”). As the phrase goes, “The tongue cannot soil it.” Thus, philosophers speak of “creative void” or “pregnant nothingness” out of which the material side of reality emerges and back into which it falls.

As with reality as a whole, so our human reality also has both material and non-material sides to it: the “psyche” being the interior reality of our being, the “physical” being the exterior reality of our being.

Actually, for Johnson, this non-material side of our human reality is larger than the material side. He states, “The greater portion of our totality is not physical, but psyche, and most of that is unconscious.”

(We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love, p. 59)

The religious quest

Traditionally, the religious quest has been the attempt to embrace and relate to the whole of reality and its essential power – a unitive experience – that includes recognizing, honoring, connecting with, and experiencing the non-material side of reality. The gods and goddesses are embodiments – images – of the essential powers and patterns of reality as well as attempts to connect with those powers and patterns.

But in our time, says Johnson, particularly in the West, the gods and goddesses have largely left the temple. The fire, the fascination, the fear that you would expect to find in the presence of a god or goddess is rarely found in the temples, tabernacles, and so-called houses of worship in our time.

These places, says Johnson, primarily teach ethics and attempt to maintaining cultural forms and values, but are largely lacking in real religious content. With regard to actual religious experience, they have become mostly empty, ritualistic form without energy or substance.

Does this mean that this energy, this fire has dropped out of reality? Not on your life. It has just migrated, that’s all.

And one of the primary places to which this fire has migrated in our time and in our culture is to romance, to romantic love – also to addictions, compulsions, and obsessions; a subject, perhaps, for another time.

But in our time, the gods and goddesses have left the temple and are found in the streets and in the marketplace. Perhaps you have encountered one or more in your lifetime, for the fire of romance is everywhere. It's the primary subject of movies and novels, of newspaper and magazine articles, of advertising our products.

What is “falling in love”?

So what is romantic love? What is “falling in love”?

Psychologically speaking, says Johnson, “falling in love” has to do with an interior image of beauty, wholeness, and perfection being projected out from one's inner being and “falling” upon another person. It's a kind of hero worship. The person upon whom this interior image falls is, thus, lifted out of the everyday, ordinary world and becomes, as it were, a god or goddess for you.

In the presence of this deity you are ushered into a place of beauty and wonder. The whole world lights up; there's an ethereal glow, a radiance that makes everything gleam in splendor.

In the presence of the beloved everything bears such meaning and value. Ordinary time loses its meaning; hours slip by in a flash. You are exalted; you walk on clouds. You feel completed; you feel whole.

In the absence of the beloved there is longing, suffering, and despair.

In the experience of “falling in love” one is, as it were, outside of oneself, in an ecstatic state – “ecstasy,” from the Greek, *ekstasis* – *ek* + *stasis* – “standing outside of oneself.”

It is an experience of being taken over, captured, and possessed. The ego's boundaries are invaded, dissolved; one is taken in and taken over by larger life; one fuses with the beloved so that there is no “I” and there is no “Thou,” there is only “the one”.

What I am describing here is the mystical experience in which the boundaries fall and the unity of being, not its separateness, is directly felt and experienced.

Such mystical experiences have, traditionally, been the province of religion. One went to the temple in search of the ecstatic experience. One went to the temple to meet one's deity, to commune, to worship at the feet of an image of one's god or goddess.

And this is Robert Johnson's main point: the deities have left the temples. The images of God, in both male and female forms, are no longer sought or found in the temple, but in

our time, they have migrated from the temple to the streets so that now the images of the divine are found on the faces of ordinary men and women in everyday, ordinary life.

And so, for Johnson, in our age, the real religious experience, the ecstatic experience, the unitive experience, is not typically sought or found in organized religion but rather is both sought and found in romantic love.

Romantic love is, thus, our secular age's "religious experience." Persons who would have nothing to do with religion or any thoughts beyond the horizontal, material world are taken over by powers beyond themselves, powers beyond their ego control and their mastery of life.

From Johnson's point of view, these larger powers of life *will* seek you out. If you don't go to the temple to find them, or if the temple has dismissed them, they will still seek you. They will find and shake you, one way or the other.

So this, for Johnson, is the power that has erupted in our age in the form of romantic love. And how are we handling it?

Frankly, it's been a bit of a challenge. So let's look more closely at some of its problems and opportunities.

A muddling of different types of love

The primary problem Johnson sees with regard to romantic love is that we have confused and muddled up a number of different and distinctive energies; we have mixed up a number of different loves. We may identify and distinguish three basic loves:

One type of love is the powerful biological, sexual drive that has been called "*eros*," which Joseph Campbell colorfully describes as "the zeal of the organs for each other."

Erotic love is biological urge, the drive to procreate, the instinct in all of nature and ourselves to further one's individual gene pool.

Eros is an indiscriminate drive; it simply wants to fulfill itself. "Urge and urge and urge," says the poet Whitman, "Always the procreant urge of the world."

("Song of Myself," Leaves of Grass, chant 3)

A second type of love, also indiscriminate but very different than *eros*, is "*agape*" – agapic love. This is a love that is concerned for the well-being of another – any others, all others, with no distinctions of any kind.

It's the love that St. Paul praises in the Christian scriptures as a love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude; a love that does not insist on its own way; a forgiving love; a love that rejoices in the successes of others and does not gloat at their failings; a love that, as he says, "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all

things, endures all things.” (I Corinthians 13)

A third type of love is the one I am talking about today: romantic love. This love, in contrast to both eros and agape, is very discriminating. In it one’s soul fastens onto another individual, as in a poem by Emily Dickinson:

The Soul selects her own Society -
Then - shuts the Door -
To her divine Majority -
Present no more -

Unmoved - she notes the Chariots - pausing -
At her low Gate -
Unmoved - an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat -

I’ve known her - from an ample nation -
Choose One -
Then close the Valves of her attention -
Like Stone -

(#409, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed., R. W. Franklin)

This very selective love is, in contrast to agapic love, a completely self-concerned, self-involved, and self-absorbed love. The interest in romantic love is to fulfill one’s self, to complete one’s self, to find wholeness, to experience passion and ecstasy, delight, wonder, and beauty.

In romantic love the interior soul projects itself onto another, using the other person as a vehicle, screen, or mirror for that projection. “Falling in love” occurs when there is a mutual projection and reception of interior soul images.

Romantic love, sexuality, and marriage

Romantic love, as indicated earlier in my reading, had its modern beginnings in the 12th century. It was a “courtly love” involving a romance between a fair lady and a noble knight.

Originally, this was not to be a sexual love. To mix in the sexual drive would be to diminish the romance, which had more to do with a spiritual quest. Besides, the fair lady was typically already married; the noble knight was to adore and worship her from a distance. It was at a distance that they were to fan their mutual passions. Also, getting too close might spoil the game – interfere with the projection.

However, in time romantic love became mixed with erotic love, and in time the two of these were mixed with the institution of marriage ... to the point that in our time romantic love has become the expected entry point for marriage, almost a prerequisite – if you’re

not “in love,” should you really think about getting married? And, conversely, if you happen to “fall in love,” shouldn’t you really consider getting married?

I think, in this regard, of a couple I once knew who were good friends, friends who respected each other and enjoyed each other’s company. But then – whoosh – a romantic flame entered their relationship. This, of course, meant that they should get married, which they proceeded to do. But probably they wouldn’t have thought of getting married without that romantic fire.

So “falling in love” as the entry point for marriage is something that has been with us for some time now in the West. And, of course, this fire is spreading like wildfire throughout the world. The old system of arranged marriages continues to give way to the new system in which not only will a couple decide and choose for themselves who they will marry, but they will tend to marry only someone with whom they have fallen “in love.” (The play and movie, Fiddler on the Roof, is a wonderful drama of the old system giving way before the new system.)

Romantic love as the basis for marriage

But it’s one thing for romantic love to be the entry point for marriage, it is yet another thing to make romantic love the basis for marriage. And, here, says Johnson, is where we see two vastly different systems in collision – in collision because the order of interests and priorities in the two systems is exactly in the reverse order.

The order of interests and priorities in romantic love is: first, the self and its completion, fulfillment, and passion; secondly, the other person who you need as a vehicle in order to complete yourself; and, thirdly, the relationship, which you can and probably should dissolve if it no longer serves to complete and fulfill you.

In marriage, traditionally conceived – that is, as a life-long commitment and relationship – the order is the exact opposite. It is, first, the relationship, which each person serves and which holds fast through good and ill; secondly, the other person, your partner, who you care for through thick and thin; and, thirdly, yourself, for you have to maintain your individuality and integrity as a human being to both care for the well-being of your partner and to serve the relationship.

The problem of romantic love and relationship

Thus, romantic love as a basis for a life-long marriage commitment has some problems, beginning with the fact that romantic love is not really about a relationship with another person; rather, it’s about a relationship with one’s image of beauty, wholeness, and perfection – the other person, as indicated, being a vehicle, screen, or mirror for that projected image of perfection.

Indeed, in our society we spend a lot of time and money polishing our mirrors to receive the projection of others – as advertisers are well aware and which they encourage. Any

supermarket checkout station will have a whole section of magazines giving advice on how to polish your mirror to attract the projection of another, magazines which also give advice on how to keep the projection going when it seems the mirror has become clouded and the romance is wearing thin – “Ten Sure-fire Ways to Keep Your Projections Going.”

Thus, there’s a kind of paradox in romantic love: It is, on the one hand, a very particular, selective love or attraction. One is, after all, seeking the perfect image of one’s own aimed-at perfection. But, on the other hand, particular as it is, it doesn’t really care about the particular individual in his or her own right; it only cares about the other as a completion of itself – of the other’s capacity to reflect one’s image of perfection. Writes Johnson:

One of the great paradoxes of romantic love is that *it never produces human relationship as long as it stays romantic*. It produces drama, daring adventures, wondrous, intense love scenes, jealousies, and betrayals; but people never seem to settle into relationship with each other as fresh-and-blood human beings until they are out of the romantic love stage, until they *love* each other instead of being “in love.”

(We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love, p. 133)

Thus, real relationship, he believes, cannot begin until the projection begins to be withdrawn.

But not to worry; in time it will withdraw.

In the myth of Tristan and Iseult, the original myth that lays out the whole dynamic of romantic love (as Johnson wonderfully demonstrates in the book), the love potion that they drink and by means of which they fall under the spell of romantic love wears off in three years.

Don’t take that number literally, but do take literally the idea that being “in love” is of limited duration. The potion will wear off try as one might to keep its effects going. Sooner or later, you will find yourself next to an ordinary flesh-and-blood human being.

Now you are at both a dangerous and potentially creative place. The danger is that you may believe that the wearing off of the divine perfection of the other is actually about that other person rather than your own image of perfection withdrawing itself from that person.

Thus, you may go in search of another face – or face after face – on whom your image of projection might land. More likely, by the time your projection has withdrawn and you realize are no longer “in love” with your former beloved, you have already discovered a new potential candidate for your projection.

Creative possibilities at the withdrawal of projection

But there are also a number of creative possibilities at the withdrawal of the projection of romantic love are. Let me conclude with several of them:

1) First, you may begin to develop a real relationship with the other person. This will be based on knowing and being known, on caring and being cared for, on building a life together, on supporting the skills, interests, and aptitudes of the other, on being part of and supporting a larger community.

2) Secondly, you may begin to develop your own undeveloped potential.

Following Johnson's definition of romantic attraction, a large part of what gets projected onto the face of the beloved is your own undeveloped potential. You can find that potential emerging as certain aspects of your romantic connection begin to chaff, as the gleam wears off the wonderful qualities of the beloved, as some of the very things you believed you were most attracted to in the beginning now reverse themselves, becoming more irritants than attractions:

- the directness you admired now punctures you;
- the logical precision you reveled in now cuts you like a knife;
- the independent strength you looked up to has become icy, brittle distance;
- the sweetness you drank in now has a syrupy taste;
- the domesticity you craved has become boring tedium.

These are indications that these qualities also belong to you, not just to the other person. And now you don't need the other person to carry them for you anymore. You want to develop them yourself. You want to become more whole. In truth, you don't want the other person to carry to them for you anymore.

This may, indeed, be a relief for the other person, for, after a time, it becomes a burden and no longer a privilege to carry another's image of perfection. It's quite enough to live out the potentials of your own life.

And, besides, we are not gods and goddesses; we are mortals. We are not symbols as they are, and we should not be asked to be symbols for others, at least not on a long-term basis.

We see how great the burden of being symbol is by observing such public mirrors as a Marilyn Monroe or, more recently, a Britney Spears – how they crack under the strain. One might conjecture that Britney Spears' recently episode of shaving her own head with a clippers – I understand the hairdresser refused to do this for her – is a way of saying, "I can't – I won't – be mirror for you anymore."

3) Thirdly, besides the strain of not being strong enough to be mirrors for others on a long-term basis, we also long to be related to the wholeness of our being. This wholeness includes both our strengths and our weaknesses.

As it happens, in addition to developing some of the undeveloped positive potentials in one's life when the love potion wears off, there is also the possibility that you might also begin to repair some of the wounds in your life.

Robert Johnson doesn't talk about this aspect of romantic love, but I have a psychologist friend, a marriage counselor, who maintains that what really locks a couple together in romantic love is not so much the undeveloped positive potentials but, even more, the psychic wounds the two persons bear. These underground wounds or holes match each other and fuse together – which is the real tie that binds. Out of all the possibilities available to you for places upon which your soul-image might land, intuitively, uncannily one chooses the very person whose psychic injuries match yours – so goes my friend's hypothesis.

For the time that the love potion lasts these underground aspects of your connection are not noticed, but as the spell of the love potion wears off the wounds begin to fester and manifest themselves, with the real possibility that the lovers will further wound each other – to the point that the intensity of the previous love passion is matched, or even exceeded, by an intensity of hatred that knows no bounds. Being with the beloved was once heaven, but now with the same person right next to you, it is absolute hell.

The opportunity, here, once the projection withdraws, is to patiently begin to heal these wounds. With some willingness to hang in and seek some understanding, the couple who have been bound together in passion can now together learn about shortcomings and interior injuries that largely brought them together. Together, then, they can work to individually and as partners become more whole. This is difficult work, perhaps the most difficult, but very fruitful.

And this is where the willingness to enter suffering comes in. All the great romantic love stories involve pain and suffering – suffering of various kinds:

- suffering when absent from the beloved;
- suffering in jealousy at some perceived unfaithfulness of the beloved;
- suffering over the losses that may be required to be in the presence of the beloved;
- suffering society's lack of understanding at not seeing what you see in your beloved;
- but then, most of all, suffering when the inevitable ecstasy fades despite many attempts to maintain it.

But the *healing suffering* that Robert Johnson speaks about is the suffering that comes with the change of consciousness needed to allow the projection of perfection to be withdrawn from the other and so to begin to form a real relationship that involves learning to accept and live with and care for this other person in a human way. (I will speak more about Johnson's idea of conscious suffering on Good Friday.)

4) Let me conclude with one final opportunity related to the love potion wearing off:

We may ask, “But what about the ecstasy? Is the delicious experience of connecting with a reality that is larger than one’s self forever gone?”

There is a way, believes Johnson...

The ecstatic meeting of the gods and goddesses in our age is not typically to be found in the temples of organized religion. And projecting their images onto the faces of flesh-and-blood human beings is not workable in the long run – the vessels cannot bear the freight.

But you can still meet these deities, these powers, in an inner temple and by doing inner work – through meditation, through art, through attention to dreams and the imagination. Here the powers that are larger than our ego still reside, and here we can continue to meet them.

Johnson’s belief is that if you do your inner work you can find your way. If you do this work, you will experience a connection to a larger reality (which is the essence of the religious experience).

And, as a further bonus if you do your inner work, you may eventually come back to the one you once fell in love with and find that he or she truly is a god or goddess, but now in a different way than you first saw – now in the sense that all particles of being are full of divine energy, all individual forms of reality are images of the whole of reality, microcosms of the entire splendid macrocosm.

By standing close to this particular particle, by getting to really know this particular individual in his or her own right, you connect with the whole reality – with its miraculousness, its wonder, its divinity.

The beloved once again carries an image of the divine, but now the beloved doesn’t carry your image of the divine for you.

Now you know that the wholeness of all being is present in each and every being, including the one that you are privileged to be closest to and to relate to in a loving, caring, and very human way.

Benediction

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other’s arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance.
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,

Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.

(Wendell Berry)

Extinguishing of Chalice

And now we extinguish our chalice
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on March 25, 2007. The spoken service, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)