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all about love

NEW VISIONS



bell hooks

Author of Salvation: Black People and Love

"A warm affirmation that love is possible."

—NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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N E W V I S I O N S

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Perennial

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Introduction

GRACE: TOUCHED BY LOVE

It is possible to speak with our heart directly. Most ancient cultures know this. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend. In modern life we have become so busy with our daily affairs and thoughts that we have lost this essential art of taking time to converse with our heart.

—JACK KORNFIELD

ON MY KITCHEN wall hang four snapshots of graffiti art I first saw on construction walls as I walked to my teaching job at Yale University years ago. The declaration, “The search for love continues even in the face of great odds,” was painted in bright colors. At the time, recently separated from a partner of almost fifteen years, I was often overwhelmed by grief so profound it seemed as though an immense sea of pain was washing my heart and soul away. Overcome by sensations of being pulled underwater, drowning, I was constantly searching for anchors to keep me afloat, to pull me back safely to the shore. The declaration on the construction walls with its childlike drawing of unidentifiable animals always lifted my spirits. Whenever I passed this site, the affirmation of love’s possibility sprawling across the block gave me hope.

Signed with the first name of local artist, these works spoke to my heart. Reading them I felt certain the artist

was undergoing a crisis in his life, either already confronting loss or facing the possibility of loss. In my head I engaged in imaginary conversations about the meaning of love with him. I told him how his playful graffiti art anchored me and helped restore my faith in love. I talked about the way this declaration with its promise of a love waiting to be found, a love I could still hope for, lifted me out of the abyss I had fallen into. My grief was a heavy, despairing sadness caused by parting from a companion of many years but, more important, it was a despair rooted in the fear that love did not exist, could not be found. And even if it were lurking somewhere, I might never know it in my lifetime. It had become hard for me to continue to believe in love's promise when everywhere I turned the enchantment of power or the terror of fear overshadowed the will to love.

One day on my way to work, looking forward to the day's meditation on love that the sight of the graffiti art engendered, I was stunned to find that the construction company had painted over the picture with a white paint so glaringly bright it was possible to see faint traces of the original art underneath. Upset that what had now become a ritual affirmation of love's grace was no longer there to welcome me, I told everyone of my disappointment. Finally someone passed on the rumor that the graffiti art had been whitewashed because the words were a reference to individuals living with HIV and that the

artist might be gay. Perhaps. It is just as likely that the men who splashed paint on the wall were threatened by this public confessing of a longing for love—a longing so intense it could not only be spoken but was deliberately searched for.

After much searching I located the artist and talked with him face-to-face about the meaning of love. We spoke about the way public art can be a vehicle for the sharing of life-affirming thoughts. And we both expressed our grief and annoyance that the construction company had so callously covered up a powerful message about love. To remind me of the construction walls, he gave me snapshots of the graffiti art. From the time we met, everywhere I have lived I have placed these snapshots above my kitchen sink. Every day, when I drink water or take a dish from the cupboard, I stand before this reminder that we yearn for love—that we seek it—even when we lack hope that it really can be found.

THERE ARE NOT many public discussions of love in our culture right now. At best, popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is talked about. Movies, music, magazines, and books are the place where we turn to hear our yearnings for love expressed. Yet the talk is not the life-affirming discourse of the sixties and seventies, which urged us to believe “All you need is love.” Nowadays the most popular messages are those that de-

clare the meaningless of love, its irrelevance. A glaring example of this cultural shift was the tremendous popularity of Tina Turner's song with the title boldly declaring, "What's Love Got to Do with It." I was saddened and appalled when I interviewed a well-known female rapper at least twenty years my junior who, when asked about love, responded with biting sarcasm, "Love, what's that—I have never had any love in my life."

Youth culture today is cynical about love. And that cynicism has come from their pervasive feeling that love cannot be found. Expressing this concern in *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Harold Kushner writes: "I am afraid that we may be raising a generation of young people who will grow up afraid to love, afraid to give themselves completely to another person, because they will have seen how much it hurts to take the risk of loving and have it not work out. I am afraid that they will grow up looking for intimacy without risk, for pleasure without significant emotional investment. They will be so fearful of the pain of disappointment that they will forgo the possibilities of love and joy." Young people are cynical about love. Ultimately, cynicism is the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart.

When I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place of

love in any movement for social justice. Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic. Yet young listeners remain reluctant to embrace the idea of love as a transformative force. To them, love is for the naive, the weak, the hopelessly romantic. Their attitude is mirrored in the grown-ups they turn to for explanations. As spokesperson for a disillusioned generation, Elizabeth Wurtzel asserts in *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*: “None of us are getting better at loving: we are getting more scared of it. We were not given good skills to begin with, and the choices we make have tended only to reinforce our sense that it is hopeless and useless.” Her words echo all that I hear an older generation say about love.

When I talked of love with my generation, I found it made everyone nervous or scared, especially when I spoke about not feeling loved enough. On several occasions as I talked about love with friends, I was told I should consider seeing a therapist. I understood that a few friends were simply weary of my bringing up the topic of love and felt that if I saw a therapist it would give them a break. But most folks were just frightened of what might be revealed in any exploration of the meaning of love in our lives.

Yet whenever a single woman over forty brings up the topic of love, again and again the assumption, rooted in

sexist thinking, is that she is “desperate” for a man. No one thinks she is simply passionately intellectually interested in the subject matter. No one thinks she is rigorously engaged in a philosophical undertaking wherein she is endeavoring to understand the metaphysical meaning of love in everyday life. No, she is just seen as on the road to “fatal attraction.”

Disappointment and a pervasive feeling of brokenheartedness led me to begin thinking more deeply about the meaning of love in our culture. My longing to find love did not make me lose my sense of reason or perspective; it gave me the incentive to think more, to talk about love, and to study popular and more serious writing on the subject. As I pored over nonfiction books on the subject of love, I was surprised to find that the vast majority of the “revered” books, ones used as reference works and even those popular as self-help books, have been written by men. All my life I have thought of love as primarily a topic women contemplate with greater intensity and vigor than anybody else on the planet. I still hold this belief even though visionary female thinking on the subject has yet to be taken as seriously as the thoughts and writings of men. Men theorize about love, but women are more often love’s practitioners. Most men feel that they receive love and therefore know what it feels like to be loved; women often feel we are in a constant state of yearning, wanting love but not receiving it.

In philosopher Jacob Needleman's primer *A Little Book About Love*, virtually all the major narratives of love he comments on are written by men. His list of significant references doesn't include books written by women. Throughout my graduate school training for a doctorate in literature, I can recall only one woman poet being extolled as a high priestess of love—Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She was, however, considered a minor poet. Yet even the most nonliterary student among us knew the opening line of her most well-known sonnet: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." This was in pre-feminist days. In the wake of the contemporary feminist movement, the Greek poet Sappho has now become enshrined as another love goddess.

Back then, in every creative writing course the poets dedicated to the love poem were always male. Indeed, the partner I left after many years first courted me with a love poem. He had always been emotionally unavailable and not at all interested in love as either a topic for discussion or a daily life practice, but he was absolutely confident that he had something meaningful to say on the subject. I, on the other hand, thought all my grown-up attempts to write love poems were mushy and pathetic. Words failed me when I tried to write about love. My thoughts seemed sentimental, silly, and superficial. When writing poetry in my girlhood, I had felt the same confidence I would come to see in my adult life only in male writers.