

Our Human Need for Love  
Friday Forum, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2008  
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The Bulwer Lytton prize is awarded every year for the worst opening line of a novel. It is named after the great Edward Bulwer-Lytton whose novel, *Paul Clifford*, began with the immortal line, 'It was a dark and stormy night'. A few years ago, the prize was won by a civil servant called Kevin Ruston, and this was his winning submission:

Theirs was a love that transcended time, ran roughshod over moral dogmas, gaffawed in the face of adversity, rent asunder the shackles of social convention and took a sledgehammer to the crumbling walls of religious doctrine: a passionate love, a tender love, a selfless love, an undying love – not bad for two gerbils born on opposite sides of the glass partition.

Now, I don't know if gerbils are capable of such love. But I do know that human beings are, and indeed it is in our capacity for love that our humanity is most fully and clearly seen. That is why, when someone acts in a particularly *unloving* way, we call it 'inhuman'. Not that unloving behaviour is necessarily the *exception*, sadly – when we call particularly unloving behaviour 'inhuman', we are testifying to the fact that loving behaviour is the norm, love is what we are *for*, as human beings. As the Catholic poet, priest and martyr, Robert Southwell, put it, 'Not when I breathe, but when I love, I live.'

Modern psychology has taught us that we flourish best when we are loved most – though, in truth, we knew that already from our own observation and experience.

It is not necessarily *romantic* love that we need – after all, Robert Southwell was, as I have said, a Catholic priest. It is loving and being loved by fellow human beings, be they husband or wife, brother or sister, parent or child, or by our friends, that makes life worth living. Love, in short, is what we are *for*.

A reductionist, of course, would be uneasy with that bold statement. A reductionist would see romantic love as a trick played on us by our hormones, in order to get us to spread our DNA. They would see maternal love as a trick played on us to get us to look after our children, the products of the *first* trick.

Now, I am not denying that account of love. I am just denying that it is a complete account of love. I am just denying that it is sufficient in itself to explain the phenomenon of human love. Let me tell a story that embodies why, for me, that account fails to do justice to our experience of loving and being loved. It is a story told by Robert Fulghum in his book, *Everything I really needed to know I learned in kindergarten*:

Let me tell you about Nicolai Pestretsov. I don't know much about him, I don't know where he is now, but I'll tell you what I know. He was a sergeant major in the Russian army, thirty-six years old. He was stationed in Angola, a long way from home. His wife had come out to visit him.

On August 24, South African military units entered Angola in an offensive against the black nationalist guerrillas taking sanctuary there. At the village of N-Giva, they encountered a group of Russian soldiers. Four were killed and the rest of the Russians fled, except for Sergeant Major Pestretsov. He was captured, as we know because the South African military communiqué said: “Sgt. Major Nicolai Pestretsov refused to leave the body of his slain wife, who was killed in the assault on the village.” It was as if they couldn’t believe it, for the communiqué repeated the information. “He went to the body of his wife and would not leave it, although she was dead.”

How strange. Why didn’t he run and save his own hide? What made him go back? Is it possible that he loved her? Is it possible that he wanted to hold her in his arms one last time? Is it possible that he needed to cry and grieve? ... Is it possible that he didn’t care what became of him now? ...

Here’s to you, Nicolai Pestretsov [says Robert Fulghum], wherever you may go and be, for giving powerful meaning to the promises that are the same everywhere; for dignifying the covenant that is the same in any language, ‘for better or for worse, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and honor and cherish unto death, so help me God.’ You kept the faith, kept it bright, kept it shining.

People like Nicolai Pestretsov show that love is not just about survival, not just an evolutionary function. Love does not always work to our benefit, but it does always reveal our humanity.

Now the reductionist would respond that, no, love doesn’t always benefit our chances of survival, but that it does more often than not, and that is why it has developed, and that is why it persists. It is usually useful from a survival point of view for people to be tricked into loving their wives or their husbands. There may be disadvantages sometimes and Nicolai Pestretsov is a good example of the way it can be disadvantageous. But on the whole, on average, it is more often beneficial than detrimental to our chances of survival as a species, so that is why it has evolved.

Examples like those of Sergeant Major Pestretsov, where love is damaging to our chances of survival, are on this account, what Richard Dawkins calls ‘misfirings, Darwinian mistakes, blessed, precious mistakes.’

Similarly, two people falling in love beyond the age at which they could have children, is a misfiring of something that usually contributes to the survival and spread of the species.

The question is, is it a mistake? How would we feel if the evolutionary process ironed out such mistakes? How would we feel if evolution got so finely tuned that it never misfired in that blessed, precious way? Would we be happy with that? And if not, on what *basis* would we be unhappy with it?

In a nutshell, is love accidental to who we are, or it is central?

Jesus insists that it's central to who we are. Jesus insisted that it is not a mistake – it's intended, it's part of our purpose, it's what we were created for. When asked what is the most important thing asked of us, He replied, to 'love God with our whole beings and our neighbour as ourself'.

Now you may have been following me up to this point, and broadly agreeing, and you may now be thinking, 'Okay, but why bring God into it?' Answer: partly for philosophical reasons, and partly for personal reasons.

The philosophical reason, very briefly, is this: if you think that love is more than just an evolutionary trick, if you think that evolution has produced something that is more than just a biological mechanism, if you think that it has thrown up something that is central to our very existence, if you think that love is what we are *for*, then you are talking in terms of purpose. And where does that purpose come from? Whose purpose is it? Do not the effects of the apparently random processes by which we have evolved mesh rather suspiciously here with God's purposes, at least as Jesus expounds them?

Evolution may be the mechanism by which love, and indeed morality generally, have developed. But it is simply beyond science's remit to tell us whether there is a *purpose* to that development, whether there is a *rightness* to that development. The Christian faith tells us that there is, and that seems to me to mesh with our experience and our best instincts. That's the philosophical hint that seems to me to point to why we need to bring God into it.

The personal reasons for bringing God into it are the nature of the love we receive when we bring God into the equation. Expose yourself to *God's* love and you'll be loved *perfectly*. That is not our normal experience. Philip Larkin poems come to mind! 'They muck you up, your Mum and Dad', to use rhyming slang! 'They don't mean to but they do.' Our usual experience of being loved is that it can be wonderful and liberating – it can also be manipulative, smothering or abusive. *God's perfect* love for us is therefore healing of our bad experiences of 'love'.

Secondly, God being infinite, His love for us is infinite. And the experience of being loved by Him is therefore expanding.

And lastly, God being eternal, His love for us is eternal. Again, that *is* not and *cannot* be our experience of *human* love. Whether by death or by growing cold, we know that human love is not ultimately lasting. God's is. And if to be loved is to flourish, to be loved eternally opens up the prospect of flourishing, not just here and now, but equally, and even more so, the other side of the grave.