

Another Four Letter Word:  
An Unprofessional Look at Love

“All the good things that had belonged to her vanished with her love.

From the Greek myth, Eros and Psyche

“This is how I would die into the love I have for you: as pieces of cloud dissolve into sunlight.”

Rumi, Sufi mystic and poet

By S. Patrick Tinley

Sandra Skirts knew what she was doing. She had perfected the art of the pencil-drop-and-roll to such a degree that it would find its intended place below my fifth-grade desk on a regular basis. I'd reach down to pick it up, the corner of my eye catching her uncrossed those brown ankles, the patent leather shoes swaying like a metronome.

“Is this yours?” I'd ask and her saucer eyes would have me all the way until sixth period English. She was good.

I drove by the house that Sandra grew up in last week. There was foil on the windows and in the driveway sat the same '72 Country Squire Wagon that her father had bought new for “just under three big ones.”

“Look at the wood veneer, Boy,” he'd boasted. “Now, that's real laminate, my boy...real wooden plastics.”

That was right before Sandra and I went to the junior prom and 10 years before her dad died of Hodgkin's. I missed the funeral because I was in Israel pretending to grow tomatoes in a Kibbutz or following some opportunity to see the world on a sponsor's meal ticket. I'm not even Jewish but like many of the unholy acts of our past, it sounded like an idea good at the time.

I don't think Sandra ever forgave me for missing her father's funeral. We'd been split up for half a generation by then and even though she was smarter than me, I had gone away to college after high school and she'd sat at home with her sick dad, studying to be a library technician.

Sandra and I used to lie on our backs at the park after school and imagine shapes in the clouds. One Friday in early spring, the same week her father had claimed he was in “re-commission” from cancer and we had seen our picture sitting together at lunch in the school yearbook, a huge cumulonimbus floated by. I said it looked like a giant square-rigger beating to weather in an ancient sea. She said it looked like a toaster oven. I was unafraid of inconsequential consequence. She was sweet and loved small dogs more than small people. But Sandra Skirts was growing old too young. She was Candide to my Pangloss.

And since her father claimed he had “never skirted an issue in his life” he would survive and give her away at the altar. But a lot of things ended that spring Friday, including me

and Sandra. The clouds went dark and we walked home in the rain, glad for the sound of thunder to interrupt our darker thoughts.

A few years later when I was back in town for a weekend, we spent our one and only unsupervised evening together. My grand square-rigged ship was now a cargo vessel and her toaster oven was a lovely new kitchen remodeled with money left over from the life insurance. There was never a chance for any sad wisdom in compromise. It was a thing of youth, something polite but mutable, hinting of tenderness but lacking intimacy. Years later I wondered if the sorts of socially encumbered teen-flings served as a kind of rehearsal for lengthy marriages but with less mortal stakes. It wasn't that I wasn't in love, but more that I couldn't reconcile the emotion. I ended up falling back on my own selfishness to save myself from a life with her.

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Many a wistful thinker have penned such Hallmark-card claims as love is the opening of possibilities, it can set you free and send your heart soaring. But like a hubris-ridden athlete before a big game or a criminal blurting his mea culpa as he stands in judgment, the philosophers of love are often driven to their creative edges while living on their own emotional cusps; the beginning and ending of life's periods conjuring grand ideas; joy, pain and what-the-fuck-was-that-all-about.

The miserable, the mundane and the serial monogamous, they rarely say much that we remember. The artist seeks and finds their pathos, purposely sabotages relationships, and will generally screw up their love-lives for the sake of a few good paragraphs, a significant verse or a lasting canvas. As the 17th Century Romantic poet, Byron claimed "for a man to be a poet he must be in love and miserable."

I'm not sure if my art is that misanthropically-refined. More so it feels like my heart is a piñata and needs to be beaten with a stick to find out what's really inside.

A few years ago, then a budding parent myself, I rode out to my own father's grave seeking something I was not really sure of. It had been a few years since I'd been and I had to visit the cemetery office to ask for directions to his uh...place. The young clerk looked up the records and handed me a plot map.

"Section D, row 12, number 83A. You can't miss it."

"You can't what?"

"You can't miss, you know, it."

"Do you mean him? I can't miss him? Or I can't miss it?"

"The headstone, you know, that thing in the ground with his name on it that says where we put him."

"I see," and shook my head wondering if he'd been inhaling embalming fluid.

I realized then that it's hard to be a wounded idealist in a world whose favorite flavor is vanilla and where the sidewalk never cracks. It's hard to mourn well and attend PTA meetings, to honor the dead and celebrate the children, to know that if you are lucky and good, your own passing might bring a few tears. I learned that it's easy to love those who can never hurt you by dying once again.

This is the fault of love or perhaps more specifically, the ambiguity of love.

We are socially-inscribed to mistake lust for love, innately wired to confuse true admiration for unconditional devotion, and to fear falling in love for fear of the pain of

falling out of love. And from back when Aphrodite ordered her son, Eros to play that fateful trick on Psyche, until the present day ethos of Reality TV-consciousness, games of consequence continue to be played while we remain confused about love and its role(s) in our world.

Take the institution of marriage. The intention is that vows and promises are to be upheld regardless. The reality is that people don't always evolve in the same direction let alone make the effort to weave enough similar threads to sustain the eventual fabric strain.

I don't know if too many people stay married for the wrong reasons or too many people get divorced for what they think are the right reasons. Like the poet said, "the longer they were married, the closer they grew apart."

Since 5th grade I've only been married once and in (what I take to be) romantic love 2.75 times; two blondes and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a brunette (the fractional woman had a seasonally-dependant hair shade). I'm hardly qualified to make any claims on the subject. But I remember the beginnings and the endings. And the better parts of the middles.

At some point, when you rehearse something long enough, it becomes your truth. And you submit to it and her and him and do everything humanly possible not to mess it up. Especially if you've fucked up a few previous plays.

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One of the problems in discussing love is that every participant in the conversation has donned their own filter, radar and protective heat shield; existing in a different current state of association to the emotion. How can you agree that that the sky is blue when some cultures don't have a word for that shade and others are simply color blind? Can you imagine what it would be like if other social institutions were so contextually-challenged? Imagine walking into church and having the preacher tell you that he'd had a change of heart about Jesus Christ as savior because he'd cut his palms with a nail by accident and then had been robbed by a Hispanic kid named Jesus?

Such is the case within the discourse of love—its power to effect is its weakness to observe, feel, and agree upon.

Shakespeare, realizing this dilemma, wrote his tragic comedies in an effort to describe love by asking his audience to enjoin the spectrum of feelings it can emote. And to feel things powerfully is perhaps the best way to remind ourselves that we are, after all, alive. To combat existential angst by embracing the outrageous fortunes of living is not so much essential as it is survival.

The human species is determined to be in love. Or if not, something close enough to justify guilt-less sex with a significant other in hopes that it biologically or otherwise, results in the propagation of the species and/or creates some very cool and loving alt-families to raise children that might result from lust-filled hook-ups. The results of sex are not the same as the results of love. Tattoo that on your wrist for those tequila benders. You see, Shakespeare also understood the nuanced intrigue of forbidden love. Whether considering the hilarity and joy that ends *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the deep despair of *Romeo and Juliet*, it's in what forbidden love signals that resonates with us, not the love itself. Of course we all pine for the happy ending but must realize that forbidden love is mostly love without the shackles of social or morally-inscribed pressures. Both in myth and in practicality, it represents our species' desire to be with

whom we want to be with; to effect lust autotellically or only for the sake of itself, which is of course, a great challenge to monogamy and marriage.

This is not to argue for adultery, multiple partners, or less commitment to the notion of allowing love to grow and develop over time through mutual sacrifice. Not at all. But it appears that we are in a time when love--like other areas of “humanness” that were previously considered unassailable---is no longer the truest of true things. Perhaps the entertainment-love as crafted by the media is manipulated to such an extent that as a result we are de-trained in deciding if we really do love someone. Yet it has always required a great degree of personal insight and honesty when trying to define love, let alone embrace its ephemeral attributes.

Still, in the fashion of Baudrillard’s simulacrum, I wonder if even the very notion of postmodern love has fallen victim to the copy with no original.

While saying “I love you” on a regular basis is a learned pattern that would please any constructivist, I’m not sure that there hasn’t been a cost to verbalizing those three words when we don’t mean it. A recent episode of *The Bachelorette* scripted the word over 25 times in a 60 minute show. But as Nietzsche asks, “what is truth but a mobile army of metaphors?”

When you think that you are in love, ask if your faith has become your act. And do it sober.

And if you are in love with whom you are presently with, then consider yourself very lucky or very good or more likely, your partner is also very good and sort of lucky. Still, the notion of “earning” love has some merit. Like a driver’s license or an AARP discount, it must be considered a privilege not a right. The notion of free love--rampant during the 1960s resistance to conservative values—often ceased to be free nine months ipso facto.

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I believe in love at first sight. I believe in soul mates and I believe that yes, love does conquer all. But I also believe that the purposeful and contiguous act of being in love is analogous to that circus game of whack-a-mole where lots of players try and beat down the mole with a club and win the prize. It takes a variety of skills to win: quickness, patience, observant eyes and willingness to go the distance. Love is the mole that is destined to win because s/he cannot lose. S/He will forever rear her head regardless of how bad we beat him. The Mole, Love, knows that the club we wield is as soft or as hard as our willingness to accept a cheaper imitation of one of the last true currencies of any real value—unconditional love between humans.

Love is perhaps best defined by what it is not. It is not mediocre or malevolent, passionless or purposeful, stoic or stagnant. It does not ask for nor give advice. Love does not go lightly into any good night nor will it shine forever unless mutually re-powered. And it does not, as Ali McGraw suggested, mean never having to say you’re sorry.

Love does not stand on the edge of reason and will not fall unless pushed from behind. Some days it can be what two or more people agree it is for the moment. But how many relationships are sustainable when founded on an early and blurry agreement to agree? As

French, Cuban/Spanish writer, Anis Nin suggests, "love never dies a natural death. It dies because we don't know how to replenish its source."

Mostly I believe in the smell of love; the burnt toast, and cheap cologne, the chewing gum of cheesy nicknames and hiding behind the hair in your eyes, the unwashed pillow case and forever the stale coffee of a long night pining for one usable verse on a bad poem written for the best of reasons. If you don't smell love then it ain't there.

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One of my friends, a bit of an intellectual romantic, told me that "love is transmutable, therefore evolving." But for some reason I believe that four letter words shouldn't require four syllable ones to remind us of what they mean.

Love is an inner marker of an outward state. It can be a map or a myth, a place or a feeling of placeless-ness. It can be tall ships and kitchen appliances so long as they move in sync, downwind or into the eye of the storms. And once love mixes with your marrow it may be suppressed, even ignored. But you cannot kill that what which has owned you. Love is strange that way.

Only it can break your heart.

Ask any alcoholic, war veteran or mother of children; some feelings get so jumbled up with acts and identities that they never leave the core of you. And in the leaving and the breakup and the loss, one more layer of who-you-are takes roots in your soul.

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I have no desire to seek out Sandra Skirts, if even to test my theory of deep compartmentalization. She is married, I've heard, lives far away on a farm with kids and dogs and books and farming things. But there is a romantic that lurks in all of us and sometimes s/he resides just below the surface, other times in dark crevices. We want to remember young love because we've had a chance to whitewash the pain of breaking up, to sugar coat it with sweet nostalgia and better times. But after that first time, our memories of love are subject to a kind of emotional McCarthyism, an unnatural force that unfairly lumps all love together and catalyzes such totalizing claims as, "well, if it was meant to be, it would've been."

Bullshit.

Too many factors in our post millennium world affect our life-chances at finding a mate we actually have love-ish feelings for. Lots of us construct our defenses around avoiding failure instead of achieving success. We can dance around each other like junk yard dogs in the dust or Disney characters on the ballroom floor. But love should never be played like a zero sum game. People get hurt with love. They feel abandoned when reciprocity fails.

While the analog pails, the feelings prevail—your lover's unanswered calls hang you on the cross. Forgive that asshole. For they know not what a good catch I was.

Love sucks.

Yeah but love is life.

Still, love should never be regrettable.

I should've gone to the funeral.

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I don't wish that romantic love would've been easier in my life of counting love on one hand minus 2 1/4 fingers. Forget whether it's paternal, maternal, romantic or otherwise; love still remains, for most of us, an interpretable act that confounds, confuses and leaves us wondering whether to take her home or pour him into a taxi and think "whew, that was close. I actually liked that one." But how can we know love if we don't let it know us? And, new-agey as it sounds, how can we let love know us if we can hardly recognize what he/she/it stands for?

My friend, Jimmy Hunter, knows love well. Or well enough to know that he can't know it. It has taken him 58 years, four marriages, three divorces, two near-death accidents, the passing of one of his parents, the rearing of four children, three of which he thinks he fathered, and the rise and fall and rise of a multiplicity of ideologies to realize that no one can really know love. Jimmy just likes people.

And that's how he has come to know what love means. Liking people is at the root of knowing love. If that don't fly with you, write your own damn essay. I still like you for getting this far in mine.

Jimmy's challenge is that he also likes sex which--he has come to realize--can be the undoing of love. The separation of love and sexual relations should be easy to understand. The pragmatist knows that one has understandably contextual connections though each situation in and of itself is a slippery slope. One is an act, the other too-often acted upon for reasons that are often dangerously close to, and interfaced with love. But not to adhere too closely to any Roman Catholic roots, excuse me if I remind the reader that good stories (and by extension, exciting endings) are often based on rising tension and then release. Take away tension and release and you dull not only the story but erase the human species.

And many are the suggestive anecdotes of lust confused with love. When Will Ferrell's character in *The Wedding Crashers*, Chazz Reinhold, claims that "grief is nature's most powerful aphrodisiac," can we be sure that he isn't suggesting the fish ladder hook up/comeback after failed love is both shallow in idea but opens our hearts to admittance on our part in the failed journey before? If you want a better chance at making a relationship last, then screw up a good one first. Or have it screwed up for you. Love, sex, and good narratives allow a resonant tale to slowly gather steam, create conflict, increase the tension, and then resolve the issue, all the while in an effort to make sense of the episode through a dénouement--the resolution of all conflict and catharsis--that concludes and synthesizes the plot.

That's where the post-coitus cigarette must've been lit.

While that might be a proper directive for the author to craft on the page, it's something else all together to live out in a long term relationship where the word love, in its overuse, has come to mean both feelings for wine, grandchildren and a new season of *X-Files*. Certainly the word, in its pervasive appropriation by those-that-mean-well-but-maybe-not, has been used-to-death. While Johnny Cash called it a "burning thing" and Bob Dylan claimed it "just a four letter word," popular culture's embroidery of the term

has only served to highlight what authenticity is left in the truer meaning and action behind the symbolic interpretation.

Real love is like rain, hard in sound, soft to the touch.

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Some days I think that I wish I wanted to be falling in love again. I want to be all goo-goo and ga-ga like in the other first days when I was barely legal, just married or just old enough to get shot with my own gun. I want to know that I am human because love and its resultant plethora of emotions remind me so. I want to wake up, smell the fresh coffee on the stove and think, that is the odor of love. But as *en vino veritas* from the night before, I do know that there is often more truth in sustainable love; the coffee reheated but with fresh cream, the night remembered both symbolically, significantly, and pragmatically.

Keep the door shut just enough to hear the kids but closed enough that they might knock. Still, there are always and already barriers to any kind of love. Blame it on the tequila or that other big worm that tempted Eve in the Garden. Blame it on the kids, the dog, the creditors or the clouds. Blame it on your spouse.

Blame it on your fear of leaving or finding a partner.

But don't blame it on love itself. At least one thing left must remain unvanquished.

And perhaps only love can play that role well enough.