

WHAT IS LOVE? REVISITED



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Some years ago, in honor of Valentine's Day, Dr. Robert Birch and I wrote two articles about love entitled, *What is This Thing Called Love?* And *How Do We Fall In Love?* Because these articles captured so much attention from our readers, I am again writing about LOVE.

People have always wondered about love, specifically about "What is love?" Love has been the universal theme of poets, novelists, playwrights, song writers and singers, philosophers, movie makers, and on and on... One reason for this is the obvious..."love makes the word go 'round!" People need love. People need people. Love keeps people attached and feeling alive. Babies who aren't loved fail to thrive and die.

In reality, there is no correct answer to the riddle "what is love?" To address the question invites a multitude of answers that are unique and diverse. Each human being has a different understanding about "what is love" that is very personal, based on a lifetime of experiences starting with family and

continuing from relationship to relationship. These experiences shape and influence how love is perceived and expressed by that person. Gender greatly influences this process since males and females often have different ways of perceiving and expressing love, based on how they were raised. Also, a person's unique biological and psychological makeup and needs also play an integral part in this process.

An easier question to address is to ask why is love often so confusing?

Dorothy Tennov writes about this confusion in her book *Love and Limerence* (1979), and comes up with her reasons love is confusing: She states that people often confuse love with limerence, which is the early stages of attraction and infatuation in a relationship during which time we see no faults. She emphasizes that limerence is not love. In limerence, we are often blinded by our feelings and rush to bond with someone we do not know. Also, she states, "Human beings have had difficulty differentiating among: 1) sexual desire, 2) liking, in the sense of friendship, 3) affection and 4) love, in the sense of concern for the other person's welfare."

Limerence is often combined with sexual desire (lust), but not always. The

Greek philosopher Plato wrote, "Love is a grave mental disease." Hence, he advocated "platonic love." He was probably talking about lust combined with limerence, also confusing it with love.

One way to differentiate limerence from love is to realize that limerence is usually short lived, being biochemically based. True love takes longer to develop, sometimes growing out of limerence, sometimes not. If the relationship is only based on limerence, the feelings eventually fade to indifference or dislike.

Myths about love, that society preaches and people believe, add to the confusion about love. Love myths create unrealistic expectations about love and relationships, thereby adding to the misunderstandings. Barbara De Angeles, PhD talks about "Love Myths" in her book, *"Are You the One for Me?"* Here are some "love myths" and "love realities" she discusses:

Myth 1) "True love conquers all."

Myth 2) "When it's really true love, you will know it the moment you meet the other person."

Myth 3) "There is only one true love in the world who is right for you."

Myth 4) "The perfect partner will fulfill you completely in every way."

Myth 5) "When you experience powerful sexual chemistry with someone, it must be love."

Reality 1) "Love is not enough to make a relationship work-it needs compatibility and commitment."

Reality 2) "It takes just a moment to experience infatuation, but true love takes time."

Reality 3) "It is possible to experience true love with more than one person-there are many potential partners you could be happy with,"

Reality 4) "The right partner will fulfill many of your needs but not all of them."

Reality 5) "Good sex has nothing to do with true love, making love does."

Another reason love is confusing is because in our (English) language, we have only one word for loving (i.e., love). Love might be easier to understand, if people accept the theory which purports that "there is no one kind of love but rather six distinct styles."

In two books, *Loving Styles* by Rosenman (1979) and *Styles of Loving* by Lasswell and Lobsenz (1980), the authors present this interesting theory of love, explaining that each of us develops a unique combination of six different styles of loving. These styles have been labeled with the Greek words: Storge, Agape, Mania, Pragma, Ludus, and Eros (S-A-M-P-L-E):

- 1) A **Storge** lover bases love on friendship and companionship. Storge love is stable but lacks in excitement. Sex is not central to a storge relationship.
 - 2) An **Agape** lover is giving and forgiving, believing that love means putting the partner's welfare first.
 - 3) A **Mania** lover adds high energy and excitement to the relationship. Mania loving is being madly in love. While a bit of mania loving is energizing, too much can be obsessive and destructive.
 - 4) **Pragma** love is practical, from the head not the heart. A true pragma lover goes out with a mental shopping list of qualities required in a prospective partner.
 - 5) **Ludus** lovers play games. They are into pursuit and conquest. Commitment is frightening to them.
 - 6) **Eros** lovers are the romantic lovers. Eros lovers value intimacy, both emotional and physical, believe in love at first sight, and usually wish to be sexual in a relationship earlier than people who love with a different style. The exception to the latter are ludus lovers, who also want sex early in a relationship. However, eros lovers want to make love, while ludus lovers just want to "score."
- In my practice, I often hear these concerns, "I am afraid I am not really in love with my partner." "I love my partner but not in the right way." "I don't feel loved even though my partner says he

loves me." These concerns remind me just how confusing love can be to many people.

In this article, I have tried to highlight some of the reasons love can be confusing and how to better understand love. By better understanding love, perhaps we can begin to understand why two people can love each other, but neither feel loved. Perhaps we can also begin to understand how to love better (ourselves included) and have better relationships.

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