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The Problem of Romantic Love

It is hard to admit that one was without love in the past. And yet—love would not be the moving, the gripping, the searing experience that it is if the moved, gripped, seared soul were not conscious of the fact that up to this moment it had not been moved nor gripped.

—*Franz Rosenzweig*

Most of my gay patients over the last thirty years have told me about their problems with love. Some have difficulty falling in love, and staying in love is even harder. These may not be the main reasons they seek help, but sooner or later most want to discuss love in their treatment. This book is about the difficulty many gay men have loving and being loved and how I have tried to help them.

I do not limit the concept of romantic love to romance or simply to sexual desire or the rhapsodic experience of falling in love, but I also include the enduring experience of staying in love. Romantic love is based on sexual passion, and this passion is of primary importance early in all relationships of romantic love. The nature and the degree of one's sexual desire, however, will change over time. As romantic love is altered by familiarity and by care and concern for the well-being of another person, it becomes less selfish and more about his needs, less an expression of high-

pitched excitement and more about closeness. Committed relationships of romantic love are motivated by the desire for happiness.

Long-term loving relationships are difficult for anyone. Montaigne was convinced that marriage and romantic love were incompatible, and Bertrand Russell doubted they could be reconciled. Freud also wrote about the difficulty of maintaining passion in marital relationships and held that there was always a tension between sexuality and love. Sexual passion was, to Freud, unbridled id suffused with aggression, while love demanded tenderness and affection, warmth and altruism. According to Freud, to achieve love in a relationship, the sexual instincts have to be sublimated. It is not healthy to separate sex and love, he maintains when discussing the whore-madonna complex, and we spend much of our adult life trying to bring love and sex together.

Freud was pessimistic about civilized man ever being truly able to express his sexuality free of inhibition. This was not all bad, though, because sublimated sexual feelings were an enormous source of creativity, and sexual feelings that were “inhibited in their aims . . . are especially adapted to create permanent ties.”

Although heterosexuals have difficulty maintaining relationships, committed relationships between gay men are even more difficult to sustain. I am convinced that if these relationships were better, many gay men would have happier and more fulfilling lives.

Gay men and lesbians should have the same legal, financial, and social protections of their committed relationships that heterosexuals do. They should not only be permitted to marry—they should be encouraged to do so. Marriage gives

two people who are striving to remain together the sense that their relationship has a special, extraordinary significance. It is a familiar structure within which they can experience and express their love and regard for one another and make the day-to-day accommodations and compromises that all intimate relationships demand. The absence of this structure and of the incentives and the social endorsement for committed relationships contributes to the experience of many gay couples that their relationships are second best. As a result, they make less of an effort to nurture these relationships.

The lack of the right to marry and of the privileges of a socially sanctioned marriage and even the customary absence of children in gay relationships are not the main reasons that most of these relationships do not endure. A more crucial reason is that many gay men lack self-love, which makes it difficult and often impossible to give and accept love over any significant period of time.

True self-love derives from a child having felt loved, accepted, and appreciated. Parental love gives someone the confidence that he or she deserves to be loved and inclines that person to provide regard, support, and affirmation to another, which then encourages love. Those who do not value themselves and who do not believe they are lovable are inclined to be selfish, demanding, mean, or critical in their intimate relationships as a way of discouraging their partners' love. And if a partner, out of love or concern, can disregard the way he is being treated and can make an effort to respond lovingly, his love will usually be rebuffed. Those who lack self-love are convinced that another's love, sooner or later, will turn into the familiar and expected rejection that they believe they deserve.

I've observed that the manner in which homosexual boys are raised and treated by their parents—who are usually uneducated about and unempathic to their children's particular needs—is the main reason most gay men have not developed the love of self that enables them to trust another's love. Some have difficulty falling in love and others find that they are incapable of relying and depending on one other person for an extended period of time. This renders them unable or unwilling to make the commitment that is indispensable for an enduring love.

All men raised in our macho society are acculturated to be independent. As adults, heterosexual men and gay men alike feel encumbered if they must depend on another person, and both make unconscious choices, because of anxiety about their dependency, that may destabilize their intimate relationships. Yet two gay men in a relationship, undeterred by a woman's tolerance for or fostering of a partner's dependence, will often inadvertently but sometimes explicitly encourage each other to have sex outside of the relationship and to make vocational choices that entail long periods of time apart. Extra-relationship sex, preoccupation with one's vocation, and long periods of time apart from one another diffuse unwanted dependence and ultimately undermine both partners' trust in and love for each other, as well as undermine the stability of the relationship.

Our society's continuing prejudice against the expression of homosexual love certainly contributes to the difficulty adult gay men have falling in love or sustaining their relationships over time. Earlier, as adolescents, their fear of rejection may have made it problematic to be openly gay and then difficult to find gay peers for friendships and for

romantic and sexual encounters. Gay adolescents still usually hide their sexual orientation, which makes it impossible for them to experiment with and then learn an appropriate courting behavior. This may also result in unavailable straight boys being the exclusive object of a gay adolescent's sexual fantasy, leading to powerful, unrequited, humiliating crushes and often to the rejection that causes further mistrust of relationships.

Many social conservatives base their opposition to same-sex marriage and civil unions on disputed or ambiguous biblical injunctions, on church history, or on the grounds that it would weaken traditional marriage. Others have an apocalyptic vision, fearing it will lead to the "mainstreaming of dysfunction" and to social disintegration. Some gay men are also afraid to normalize their relationships, believing that in doing so, they will be confined by a social acceptance that will deprive them of the freedom to determine the structure of their relationships for themselves.

Because of what I have learned from my patients about their difficulties in forming and sustaining relationships and what I have heard from and observed of friends and acquaintances, I am not confident that this freedom and the sexual openness of gay relationships make these relationships better than heterosexual relationships or a model for relationships in general. Gay men render a valuable service to society with their relative lack of violence, their sensitivity to other minorities, their high rate of volunteerism, and their artistic, civic, and financial contributions. Yet promoting a new sexual democracy or making vocational and other decisions that do not consider the needs of one's partner or of the relationship are more often than not a rationalization for

how many gay men deal with their unwelcome needs, lack of self-love, and mistrust of another person's love. Respect for your partner's right to do what he wants in the moment may be democratic in the sense that you don't impose your will on him, but it is often not respectful of the relationship or of both of your long-term needs. Allowing this freedom may eclipse a sense of obligation and duty to each other and may hinder the capacity to make those sacrifices and compromises that are necessary to nourish one another's love.

When self-esteem has been sufficiently injured, and therefore one does not believe that he is lovable or that he deserves to be happy, he may not be able to make the effort or find the courage to deal with normal anxieties and fears that arise in response to everyday challenges. Striving for personal happiness and self-satisfaction is then deemed justifiable only in times of extreme danger or personal crisis. Partly for this reason, at the height of the AIDS epidemic and before there were available treatments, gay men seemed to be more courageous and self-disciplined than they are now; they seemed to demonstrate greater loyalty to one another, to bond more readily in close friendships, and to be more interested in pursuing and sustaining committed romantic relationships. Now that a variety of treatments are available for HIV and AIDS, young gay men, as well as gay men in their thirties and forties, are again pursuing the pleasures of unprotected anonymous sex.

This increased interest in risky sexual activity has been facilitated by easy Internet hook-ups and by the use of crystal methamphetamine, which temporarily bolsters self-confidence and libido while lowering sexual inhibitions. Yet

the fact that risky sexual behavior is again rising also suggests that many gay men believe that they do not deserve to be well and happy. They often rationalize their conviction by saying that the fun is worth the risk. Many of these same men also believe that long-term, committed relationships involve too much work. Love requires the belief that one is worth the effort that is necessary to find it and also requires the courage and the self-discipline necessary to sustain it.

Although my observations about gay men's difficulties with intimate, romantic-love relationships are based on a sample of patients, I do not view the men I see in my office as having more problems than those I know outside of my office. They are distinguished from the population as a whole not because they are more disturbed, but because they are more inclined to seek psychological understanding of whatever problems they have, and they possess the intellectual and financial resources, as well as the motivation and the curiosity, to do so.

Most of my patients live in or around New York City. Large metropolitan areas offer more readily accessible alternatives to the love of one other person than do smaller urban or rural areas. A large, supportive gay community, friendships with other gay men, the availability of sex, as well as all the other entertainments and diversions of the city, may make a relationship seem less necessary for personal happiness than it does to people living in a rural area. Outside of metropolitan areas, gay men might be inclined to put forth more effort to make their relationships viable, overcoming by dint of necessity whatever mistrust of love they may have. Although my patient population may not, in this way, be

representative, I believe that my observations reflect the difficulties most gay men experience in their relationships.

The philosopher Irving Singer has written that “No one kind of love will satisfy all our needs on all occasions.” I know, for example, how important the love of friends is to many gay men, that friends supply the supportive and understanding community of peers many lacked while growing up. Yet I am also convinced that a relationship of romantic love combining deep friendship and passion, in which one loves and feels loved by one other person over many years, is the most effective way to provide the sense of self-worth that can compensate for injuries sustained in childhood and adolescence. Nor, it seems to me, does any other human endeavor provide the same degree of personal happiness as this relationship, which enhances not only your value but your appreciation of others and the pleasure and the beauty one experiences in the world. For many gay men, especially those who are not religious and those who do not have children, loving and being loved in a long-lasting relationship usually gives their lives transcendent significance.

As Plato wrote, “In the business of acquiring immortality, it would be hard for human nature to find a better partner than love.”