

Roses Wilt: *The Lasting Valentine of Attentiveness*

Rev. Robin L. Zucker

UU Church of Reading

February 10 2002

With aisle after aisle of heart-shaped, high-fat chocolate assortments at CVS, row upon row of florid Valentine's at Hallmark, seductive seasonal specials from Victoria's Secret, and umpteen websites from which to launch love salvos at your paramour, one can hardly imagine the need for Wally Chubb (the character from our reading earlier) to do something as extreme as eat a 747 jumbo jet, piece by jagged piece, in order to adequately express his affection for his beloved Willa Wyatt. But he does, and we're captivated.

Of course, Wally is a fictional creation of the writer Ben Sherwood. Otherwise, one can safely assume he would be dead or at least, irreparably injured, both bodily and emotionally, from his bizarre undertaking. Even so, the tough-tummy-ed Wally does provide us with an extreme example of the types of things us crazy humans do to express our romantic love.

In the age-old tradition of courtly love, one strives to perform great deeds, noble and sometimes outlandish actions for his or her beloved. For example, the rose petals strewn a foot deep in the bedroom, the sonnet written in the sky, the diamond ring embedded in a parfait – these are the grand gestures of romance. In fairy tales, the knight slays the dragon to free his true love from the tower; the goddess Aphrodite left her chariot to follow Adonis on the hunt, and in the words of one Motown classic, “There ain't no mountain high enough to keep me from you, baby.”

Valentine's Day itself was named in homage to an imprisoned third century Christian named Valentinus, who fell in love with the jailor's comely daughter. Folklore tells us that just prior to his execution, he sent the girl a note that expressed his undying affection. He signed it, “from your Valentine.” Swoon. And, in Finland of all places, where folk songs don't usually hit the charts, the group Loituma released a tune called “Ieva's Polka,” and it became a smash hit on Finnish radio. It's about a man who dances up a sweat to win his sweetheart. Whatever works!

Romantic, courtly love can bring out the best in us and also the worst. It can change us and challenge us in ways we never expected – expose our strengths and weaknesses, our heights of bravado and our depths of fear, our intensity and our silliness. This culture we live in is thoroughly fixated on being young and sexy, having fun, and being “in love.” In reality, romantic love almost always mellows in time. And if we've survived the transition, the woozy “in-love-ness” phase morphs into something a bit more sober. Dare I say the word? -- a “relationship.” Sure, the FTD folks will hate me for this, and you may already be fully aware of the fact – but all the bouquets in the world will not keep a relationship healthy and vibrant.

So, here's my sermon summary up front -- Roses wilt; cultivate attentiveness. Valentines get tossed in memory boxes; try respect. Charm fades; develop humility. Chocolates go right to your hips; focus on your heart. Romantic love puts stars in our eyes, yet only a clear vision of how we interact and how we might better interact with our partners will see us through the inevitable fog that descends on even the best relationships.

Those of us who minister can tell you about couples, gay and straight, who come in to talk with us joyfully about their upcoming weddings or services of union, as well as those who come to our offices to cry and tell us about the bumps in their partnerships. “All of these meetings increase our awareness of three things: how deep and enduring is the human need for strong attachment; how deep and enduring is the human need to be affirmed in our own way, and how fragile are the bonds that keep us connected if both partners do not begin from an awareness of the need to nurture the relationship as it unfolds.”

It should go without saying that in order to nurture a relationship, one needs to acknowledge that there is a relationship in first place. As humorist Dave Barry explains (clearly for a heterosexual audience), this acknowledgement isn't always automatic, especially for his fellow males. Barry writes to his female readers: “Never assume that a guy understands that you and he have a relationship. The guy will not realize this on his own. You have to plant the idea in his brain by constantly making subtle references to it in your everyday conversation, such as:

-- “Roger, would you mind passing me a Sweet ‘n’ Low, inasmuch as we have a relationship?”

-- “Wake up, Roger! There's a prowler in the den and we have a relationship! You and I do, I mean.”

-- “Good News, Roger! The doctor says we're going to have our fourth child, which will serve as yet another indication that we have a relationship!”

-- "Roger, although you forgot our anniversary again, I want you to know that we've had a wonderful 53 years of marriage together, which, by the way, clearly constitutes a relationship."

Barry's dead-on humor does make us laugh, but the truth behind the wit might also skewers our hearts. Relationships are hard and they require attention. This fact is evidenced by the multitude of books, tapes, workbooks, seminars, and counseling regimes designed to help us dig up our rosy illusions about relationships, and in their place, plant more firmly-rooted methods for making our relationships succeed.

One of the most useful of these books, at least in my view, is entitled *The Relationship Cure* by Dr. John Gottman, a psychologist who has devoted his career to studying how people relate to one another – for better or worst. Gottman addresses many important topics in his book, such as: the value of examining our emotional heritage, sharpening communication skills, and finding shared meaning within your relationship. Yet, the distinctive concept I wish to share with you this morning pertains to what Gottman calls "emotional bids."

According to the author, we all say and do things to get attention and make our needs known. These gestures are called "bids," the fundamental units of emotional connection. People make bids because of their natural desire to feel connected with other people. Gottman explains that all good relationships are built through a process of making and receiving successful bids. These bids range from such subtle gestures as a quick question, a look, or a comment to the most probing and intimate ways we communicate. Gottman's research reveals that people in happy relationships make bidding and responding to bids a high priority in their lives, and he has discovered the fascinating secrets behind mastering the bidding process.

Those who do so tend to "turn toward" bids from others, whereas most problems in relationships stem from either "turning away" or "turning against" bids for connection. Sadly, we get so used to one another, we don't notice the bids or we misread them. Let's unpack this idea a bit more – you may recognize yourself in one of these scenarios.

To "turn towards" a partner means to react in a positive way to one another's bids for emotional connection. One person makes a funny comment, for instance, and the other person laughs. One individual appears sad, and the other consoles her. In relationships where bids are noticed and "turned towards," the couples develop a more stable, lasting bond. They had easier access to humor, affection, and interest in one another during conflict. One person muses about a vacation and the other joins in, "That's sound like fun." Obviously, to be a master bidder, one needs to pay attention.

People who "turn against" bids for connection might be described as belligerent or argumentative. Turning against often involves sarcasm or ridicule. In one instance in Gottman's marriage lab, a wife gently asked her husband to put down his newspaper and talk to her. "And what are we going to talk about,?" he sneered. Characteristically, the wife withdraws.

Finally, "turning away" from a bid generally involves ignoring one's partner, or acting preoccupied. In one instance, a woman apologizes for a mistake she made in preparing dinner that night. She raises the issue three times during the course of the evening, obviously wanting him to let her off the hook. But all three times the husband met his wife's comments with silence and looked away. What's wrong with this picture? Across the board, problems occur because of what Gottman calls "fuzzy bidding," such as unintentionally poor communication, framing bids in negative terms, and failing to acknowledge your needs in the first place.

Gottman expresses confidence that all of us can become skilled at giving and receiving bids, but first we need to examine how we currently interact with our partner. Do we pay attention? Do we strive to connect in positive ways? Do we even think about these things? And what are the consequences of ignoring tensions?

Taking steps to "cure" your relationship, to restore it to maximum health, using Gottman's methods or others which resonate for you, will not only improve your workaday interactions, it will also enable you to invite the sacred, -- something bigger than the two of you -- more fully into your partnership. As the poet Rumi tells us:

When the rose is gone and the garden faded,
you will no longer hear the nightingale's song.
The Beloved is all; the lover is just a veil.
The Beloved is living; the lover is a dead thing.

Welcoming the sacred Beloved into human belovedness becomes a way to nurture one's own and another's spiritual

growth. The Rev. Thea Nietfeld explains that, “making the choice to love as spiritual nurturance requires clarity, and in order to practice love authentically we need to let go of what we thought we knew” -- the rosy illusions and generalizations about love.

“When we love spiritually,” she continues, “we practice care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect in relationships. A commitment to love intentionally keeps us committed to a life of truth-telling and we become emboldened to share the things that caused us to feel shameful or those pieces of ourselves that we may have sought to deny or hide.

And, rather than tightening our grip on our partners, we liberate them. In effect, we say, “I will trust you to love me honorably out of your own free will.” This is a great gift to give a partner. Yes, it’s a bit like diving off a cliff, especially if you’ve been trained in the clutch-and-grab school of relationships. But it’s worth it. As poet Marge Piercy reminds us:

It hurts to love wide open
stretching the muscles that feel
as if they are made of wet plaster,
then of blunt knives, then of sharp knives.

It hurts to thwart the reflexes
of grab, of clutch; to love and let
go again and again. It pesters to remember
the lover who is not in the bed,
to hold back what is owed to the work
that gutters like a candle in a cave
without air, to love consciously,
conscientiously, concretely, constructively.

I can’t do it, you say it’s killing
me, but you thrive, you glow
on the street like a neon raspberry.

Of course, I can’t promise that you will “glow on the street like a neon raspberry” if you take your relationships more seriously – but that wouldn’t be so bad, would it? The question is whether you will risk being called to love – “consciously, conscientiously, concretely, constructively.” The radically-honest poet bell hooks expresses this idea well: “There is no escape from this calling once we open our eyes,” she writes. “We are all mysteriously called to love no matter what the conditions of our lives. We might as well face the dangers that come with being more real, more truthful, more deliberate within our relationships because otherwise, we will love unconsciously, inadequately, perhaps even destructively.”

This spiritual dimension applies to every relationship, whether the couple acknowledges it or not. In Africa, a woman creates a sacred space where she and her husband (often an arranged match) meet. Often it is a circle on the earth where they sit and invoke the spirit together. A woman from Burkina Faso named Sobonfu writes of her mate, “Malidoma and I were strangers to one another, but each time we met in that space, it was as if we have known each other forever.”

I ask you to consider how you might create this sacred space for yourself and your partner to cultivate the attentiveness, the humility, the respect, and the clarity of vision that can nurture, support, even cure your relationships. Where might you establish a circle of honesty, intention, passion, and humor, where you can learn how to recognize one another’s emotional cues and bids and how to respond to them well?

For good measure, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tack on Dave Barry’s “subtle reminders” method, modified as needed for your purposes. “Never let up,” Barry concludes. “Pound away relentlessly at this concept, and eventually it will start to penetrate the guy’s brain. Some day he might even start thinking about it on his own. He’ll be talking with some other guys about women, and, out of the blue, he’ll say, “Elaine and I, we have, ummm . . . We have, ahhh . . . We . . . We have this thing.” And he will sincerely mean it.”

May your “thing,” present or future, embody respect, honesty, humility, tenderness, passion, humor, flexibility, and yes, clarity.

Roses wilt. Pay attention, and let true love flower.

Amen.