Loving: A Developmental Challenge of Middle Age

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ABSTRACT: The capacity to love fully is one of the central developmental challenges of middle age. Loving is predicated upon the dynamic synthesis of trusting, autonomous, and creative relationships during childhood and adolescence. With the emergence of a productive orientation during middle age, it becomes increasingly clear that it is important to work for that which we love. It is impossible to encapsulate the essence of loving, but it can be partially delineated in terms of care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. As a loving relationship develops, sexuality may emerge as another phase of mutuality. However, many loving relationships have no sexual overtones. In summary, loving is an end experience, for it engenders the joy that comes from being fully alive.

As loving is a basic orientation toward life itself, it is difficult to describe and understand. Many people believe that love can be confined to only one other person, but this misperception is based on only a partial understanding of what the process of loving really implies. A loving adult may develop one central and highly intimate relationship with another person which provides physical, economic, cognitive, and emotional continuity through time. In fact, this relationship may become so important that it becomes a part of their common existence; however, such a relationship inevitably has a profound impact on relationships with other individuals. Fromm observes:

If I truly love one person I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, “I love you,” I must be able to say “I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.”

Many people never know this type of relationship, for they believe that love means finding and then marrying a valuable partner, as determined by the current fads of the personality market. Although people in our society pride themselves upon having abandoned the idea that marriage should be a pre-arranged commercial transaction, “love” is still experienced as a commodity which is bought, sold, and advertised in the same way as other commodities. Although some people call this love, it has little to do with love, for, at best, it is based on the mutual convenience of two people and, at worst, degenerates into sexual or other types of manipulation.

Most people in our society are much more concerned with being loved than loving others; thus, they try to get love from others through being successful, popular, or sexually appealing. Thus, some people attempt to find love through the accumulation of things and power, in the belief that this will make them more lovable to others. To some extent, they are right, for indeed, those

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who accumulate wealth and power are more attractive to many people. However, this has nothing to do with loving.

Others believe that loving involves making their bodies more attractive, and are concerned with having new clothes, keeping up with current fads, and using the latest cosmetic preparations to reduce all signs of individuality to a sterile, uniform, and predetermined image of beauty. Still others seek to be more lovable through gaining popularity, and concentrate on how to “win friends and influence people,” in the belief that this will bring them closer to a “magic someone.”

For an increasingly large number of adolescents, all of these ways of “loving” involve too much effort; as they only want to have a “good time,” sheer sensuality is the answer. However, sexual relationships in which neither person cares about the other soon degenerate, become very unsatisfying, and even meaningless. All three of these desperate attempts to find love (through the search for success, popularity, or increased sex appeal) tend to isolate people from one another, and to fixate and fragment their personalities. Although these attitudes are consistent with some widespread beliefs, they are of little use in helping people understand the meaning of loving. The ability to love cannot be understood in terms of superficial external behavior, but must be viewed in terms of creating, understanding, and giving.

To love is to embark on an ongoing quest for the meaning of the moment, the meaning of interpersonal existence, and of life itself. Tagore conveys this feeling in the following poem:

The eternal Dream
  is borne on the wings of ageless Light
  that rends the veil of the vague and goes across Time weaving ceaseless patterns of Being.
The mystery remains dumb,
  the meaning of this pilgrimage,
  the endless adventure of existence—
whose rush along the sky
  flames up into innumerable rings of paths,
till at last knowledge gleams out from the dusk
  in the infinity of human spirit,
  and in that dim-lighted dawn
  she speechlessly gazes through the break in the mist
  at the vision of Life and Love
  emerging from the tumult of profound pain and joy. 4

Any quest requires courage to explore, to investigate, and to dare to reach towards another. 5 To dare is to take a step that many find difficult, as did J. Alfred Prufrock, in the following poem by T. S. Eliot:

  In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
  And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”