Some Forms of Love

There can be no question about it. Love is the greatest thing in the world. One way or another, it is a word and a feeling on everyone's lips and in everyone's heart. Its forms and expressions, presumably highly personal and private, when made public have earth-shaking effects. Thrones are vacated, political hopes destroyed, religious ambitions blasted, educational plans abandoned, scientific analyses frustrated, rational philosophies contradicted—and all for love of, by, and for human beings as they make their way through the labyrinth of life in the modern world. Innumerable books have been written about love. One might think that so ancient and established an experience as love might have evoked everything that could be said or sung about it eons ago, but not at all. Each century, indeed each decade, seems to produce new approaches and new ways of dealing with this phenomenon. We have had massive studies of human sexual behavior by people like Kinsey and Masters and Johnson. We have had innumerable how-to-do-it books, until it seems that no smallest detail of physical sexual activity has been left undescribed and unpictured. One wonders how our forebears ever managed to propagate the race without the advice and assistance now available to every high school sophomore. We have had and are still having a series of studies of various distortions of love: Women Who Love too Much; Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them; Women Men Love, Women Men Leave; Intimate Partners; and so on, for there are many more. We confess that we have not read all of these books, although we have read enough to believe that often they deal with real problems and can offer constructive ideas and help for those in need. If we accept Socrates' truism that only the examined life is worth living, it is probably also true that an examined love life is basic to health and wholeness. We have no intent to add new titles to these studies. There seems to be an abundance of authors from both sexes who have special forms and expressions of love to describe, analyze, and point toward constructive outcomes.

But we think it might be helpful to mention some of the forms of love that have played a vital part in human development from earliest recorded history, and no doubt for centuries before, and are still very much in the picture today as part of our cultural heritage. Indeed, in expressions appropriate to their own cultures, these forms are part of the whole human heritage.

Desire is certainly a central factor in every kind of love. Everybody wants to be loved and needs to be loved. At the simplest level love is a hunger for some-
thing or somebody one wants and needs. We reach out and try to grasp and hold the things we want and need the most. Erotic love is like this. It seeks to satisfy certain personal physical hungers through the body of another. Love at this level simply demands satisfaction. It is not especially interested in whether satisfaction is given as well as received. Some would argue that such raw hunger hardly deserves the name of love at all. But all love, even the highest forms, includes a desire to be at one with another being. Hence, while love is not fully described at this primitive level, it is in a degree present. This kind of love exists between men and women, as well as between men and men and women and women. Some express physical love either with members of the same sex or of the opposite sex; they are called bisexual. All of these expressions of erotic love exist in our society and within most societies we know anything about. They sometimes exist at various times in the same person with varying degrees of intensity. For now we do not judge these varieties ethically. We simply note that they exist, as part of the powerful impulse of love in all of us.

Along with the erotic aspects of love there is another stage that goes beyond simple physical gratification. This takes place when the source of gratification becomes a person, and one with whom the lover feels a special kind of belonging. This kind of love has been celebrated in popular song and story through the theme of the one and only love for whom the lover searches the whole world, finding at last the whole world in that one person. This is romanticism, the idea that from all the world two people have met and chosen each other as body-mates, soul-mates, constant companions, and sharers of marital bliss until death parts them. Traditional ideas of marriage are based on this hope that people can and do find each other in a union so deep and close that it will not be dissolved. This does happen; but it does not happen for everybody, as the divorce rate shows. It does not happen for many who stay married, even though they are bitterly unhappy and their union is destructive of family values and happiness, children, and even of the participants themselves. Still, there is enough validity in the romantic idea to bind many marriages together in reasonable happiness and usefulness to the people involved. We still believe that people who plan to get married should do so with the honest intention of staying married. Their serious intention can often be the determining factor in bringing about the face of permanence and stability.

But a sound love relationship requires more than eroticism and romanticism, more than hunger and need, more than the idealization of the fulfillment of desire. A sound human relationship requires friendship, mutuality, a giving and receiving of satisfaction at many levels. This kind of reciprocal relation implies self-love—not in the sense of selfishness, but in the sense of an awareness of the value of one's own self. Since love is a mutual affair and each must offer the other something of value, each must have a sense of value in one's own self. We may call it self-respect or self-regard. When we are enclosed by ourselves, can think of nothing else but ourselves, we are narcissistic. But