

As many of you know we are in an election year. Public radio which serves most other years as a wellspring of stimulating and interesting discourse on a variety of topics has become for me a tedious stream of speculative analysts picking listlessly at the candidate issue de jour. There are certainly discussions of value but they don't seem to be happening much when I am in my car, which is when I tend to listen. So from time to time in recent months I have been tuning in to the top ten oldies station and paying attention to what I am hearing.

I have, I confess been for most of my life a lyrics junkie. In the years before car radios actually got any kind of reception unless you were within a few miles of the transmitter, my mother and father sang together in the car when we would go to visit my grandmother who lived a few hours away.

“With someone like you, a pal so good and true, I'd like to leave it all behind and go and find, some place that's known to God alone, just a spot to call our own. We'll find perfect peace, where joys will never cease, out there beneath that kindly sky. We'll build a sweet little nest, somewhere out in the west and let the rest of the world go by.”

Or “I'm in love with you, honey, say you'll love too, honey, no one else will do, honey, seems funny but it's true. Loved you from the start honey. Bless your little heart, honey. Everything will be be so sunny, honey, with you.”

By the time I was twelve, I had learned more than a hundred of the songs from the 1920'-40's and can still hear many of them in my head, dad singing lead and my

mother singing something that I think was something like a cross between alto and tenor.

There were silly songs like “Mare Eat Oats and Does Eat Oats and Little Lambs eat Ivy” and “Hallaluia I’m a Bum” but most of them were love songs.

When I was ten I saw the movie musical *Carousel* where Gordon Mc Rae and Shirley Jones sang a duet of “If I Loved You” and fell in love on their first date. And when he turned out to a schmuck I listened with rapped attention as Mrs. Snow sang “Common sense will tell ya that the ending will be sad and now’s the time to break and run away, but what’s the use of wondering if the ending will be sad, he’s your fella and you love him, that’s all there is to say.”

In 1961 I watched as Richard Beymer fell in love with Natalie Wood at first sight in *West Side Story* and the two later confirmed their love in the lovely “One Hand; One Heart.”

And of course, I fell in love, too, again and again in spite of months of holding onto the sentiment in the song, “When I fall in love it will be forever, or I’ll never fall in love.” The myth of romantic love was mainlined into my psyche and held fast by the intricate patterning of words and melodies that came through the music of my life.

As I listen to the popular radio station play the songs of the present and the recent past, I know it is still happening. Some of the sweetness and innocence of the love songs of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has given was to a kind of desperation or

cynicism in the songs of the early 21<sup>st</sup> but the themes and the tenacity of the myth persists. From gramophone to hi fi to stereo to boom box to walkman to ipod. Remarkable to note that the young man with the plug in his head could be listening to these words by the popular band "The Cure"

Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am home again

Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am whole again

Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am young again

Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am fun again

However far away  
I will always love you  
However long I stay  
I will always love you  
Whatever words I say  
I will always love you  
I will always love you

Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am free again  
Whenever I'm alone with you  
You make me feel like I am clean again

However far away  
I will always love you  
However long I stay  
I will always love you  
Or Maybe these by Allison Krause

Seems so many times I've written down "I love you"  
Well I hope this time I can get that through your heart

Only fools will go on and keep talkin' to a wall  
But I can't fool around forever  
And if stone is the wall that you've built around your heart  
Then I guess it's goodbye in this letter

And maybe I was wrong to ever think that you could love me  
I was hoping you just couldn't find the time

Have my efforts been in vain with pen and paper?

Did you ever care, did I ever cross your mind?

Only fools will go on and keep talkin' to a wall

But I can't fool around forever

And if stone is the wall that you've built around your heart

Then I guess it's goodbye in this letter

Whether you are eighty or eighteen or any age in between, if you listen to opera or folk songs or country or pop or show tunes or the golden oldies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – on the radio, in the grocery store, in the shopping malls, we hear it:

You're nobody until somebody loves you

Love makes the world go round

love exciting and new

love soft as an easy chair

Don't you want somebody to love?

In *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, John G. Nachbar writes, “The myth of romantic love is probably the most common and universal myth of American popular culture. It drives the self consciousness of our adolescence, the anxieties of our young adulthood, the traumas of our middle years and the loneliness of our old age.”

According to Scot Peck, "The myth of romantic love is a dreadful lie. Perhaps it is a necessary lie, in that it ensures the survival of

the species by its encouragement and seeming validation of the falling-in-love experience that traps two people into a relationship like marriage."

Novelist Toni Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye* says that the notion of romantic love is one of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Its destructiveness resides in the belief that we come to love with no will and no capacity to choose. This illusion, perpetuated by the abundantly available romantic lore, stands in the way of our learning how to love truly and honestly. To sustain this perfect fantasy, we keep making the mistake of substituting romance, infatuation, lust, obsessive attachment and passion for love. The very expression 'falling in love' denotes the individual's fear, awe, fascination, doubt and hesitation in the presence of something which is unavoidable yet not fully reliable.

A contrast to this view comes from *Rev. Rebecca Armstrong* who has worked for many years as an interfaith minister helping more than 500 couples create their own weddings, the ritual entrance to the path of marriage. But over the past three years she began helping couples on the way out make a graceful parting through the ritual of divorce.

She felt called to do this because she observed the couples, not the lovers arm in arm, but lawyers and clients head to head in consultations. She observed, "As some make their way to the legal battlefields, they leech emotional poisons into the common stream of humanity. Hating, condemning or wreaking emotional vengeance on another person may feel justified for the wounded Romantic, but it pollutes the psychic waters in which we all swim. It seems we are overdue for some lessons in the spiritual ecology of Romantic Love. "Is Romantic Love a bad thing?" she asks. "Not at all." She says. "In the bright face of its arising, in the time of the troubadours, it held the freshest promise: that through the arduous art of courtly love one could begin to perceive the image of the divine in the merely human.

As tantric practice had done for the East, the West now had a method of linking the physical to the spiritual, an essential step in the redemption of the soul. Romantic Love promised to harness the fantastic energy of Eros and use it to lift the individual into spiritual ecstasy. But, like all aging mythic images, Romantic Love has come to cast a very long and rather dark shadow. Its high ideals have been co-opted by the church, the state, society, commerce and the baser drives of human psychology, until one can hardly speak of its original trajectory without eliciting sneers and raised eyebrows.

The late, great mythologist, Joseph Campbell, spoke often and

with great passion about the Myth of Romantic Love, which was, for him, the foundational psychological insight of the West. Romantic Love, at its core, is a spiritual insight. As a tool, it is one of the most powerful we have for furthering the soul's journey. But we have forgotten how to use it, and so it has become downright dangerous for us. Campbell's interpretation of the role of Romantic Love in the West was its capacity to introduce the novel idea of particularity into the primal drive of lust, possession and procreation. "This one and no other," is the cry of the true lover. This form of love, properly understood and experienced, unites the lower instincts with the energy of the heart (for the beloved) and of the mind (for the idea of love) and of the soul (for God). "

Well, as intriguing as all of these views are I don't see them getting much traction. Romantic love is undoubtedly a force of nature. Like so many seemingly irrational phenomena it has laid hold to one degree or another to every one of us. For better and for worse we live in a world of relationships of various kinds. Fortunate indeed is the comfortably single person entirely at ease with life as it is. Fortunate as well the coupled people who have found a way with patience and luck and maturity and good sense to forge an authentic loving relationship that works around bad breath and middle age spread and waxing and waning libido – hardly the stuff of love songs. The rest of us are left to

muster up the self consciousness about relationship that is necessary to override the default position created by popular culture.

It takes energy to not be disappointed to learn that your next door neighbors husband brings her flowers every Friday and in your head you hear Barbra Strisand singing "You Don't Bring Me Flowers any More" It takes energy to not to wish someone would "just call to say I love you".

I spent the best part of my vacation with my young adult children and their friends. Three of these thirty something's have been divorced – one of the remarried. One was looking forward to going back to Texas to check with her on-line dating service to see if someone had expressed interest in her profile. She has a new PhD in Psychology and is "ready for a relationship". One day after breakfast while we were still all at the table I raised the question, "How do you think your view of love has been affected by the popular culture. They all love music and I found it remarkable that to a person, each said they were better off not listening to the lyrics. My niece Katy, 26 and newly divorced, summed it up when she said, "I think I'm a healthier person when I don't listen to pop songs or watch T.V. because then my ideas come from real people and from inside me."

I performed her wedding and I found myself wishing I had warned

them about the end of the first marriage. Sometimes when people know about it before it happens or recognize it when it's happening they can end that marriage without getting a divorce. The first marriage is the one that is based on the myth. It's the happily ever after, the never having to say I'm sorry, I will never disappoint you and love will keep us together because you belong to me now marriage that was doomed from the start. I have spent easily half of my counseling time as a teacher and counselor and minister helping people come to terms with the reality of imperfect relationship. The betrayal I have seen has ever only been partially about a specific act. More often it is about a betrayal of the cultural ideal of romantic love that has not been sustained, an ideal to which lovers in our culture feel entitled.

We are part of a faith tradition grounded in reason, a tradition that calls us to our best selves, that honors each person and hold us responsible for the choices and decisions we make. We are also a people who value beauty and passion. And we are meaning makers seeking to make sense out of the world around us and our place in it. Whether the myth of romantic love is as Toni Morrison and Scott Peck say a force of destruction or as Joseph Campbell says "a powerful tool for furthering the soul's journey" it is something that demands our attention as it demands the attention of our children. It can be a either

path into or a barrier to sustained and meaningful relationship. Maybe its knowing when to hold it close and when to let it go. At the very least being in love can make for interesting memories.

Now a "mature" woman in a solid and satisfying marriage that has grown over two decades I think I have a handle on the place of romantic love in my life. It is not for me a steady state to which I feel entitled but something that happens in moments that insert themselves often unbidden into the quiet abiding unromantic love of every day. Moments of appreciation for some small act of kindness; catching my husband in some unselfconscious act of attention to a thing of beauty. And sometimes it happens when we share a love song that says so well what we too often forget to say.

Like those sappy words from the old folkies Neil and Leandra, "We've got an old love, one we never do get tired of, love that fits us like an old glove, one that warms a summer's day. We don't have to say I love you quite as often as we used to. Old love just goes without saying. We still say it anyway."

Maybe this is the stuff of yet another myth that we are at best left to find a healthy way to make real in the ways that serve us best. In an case may we hold within the reality of long and lasting love enough romantic love to keep our juices flowing.

