

Love: The Word Is Not the Thing

With Valentine's Day upon us, there is no shortage of words about love.

A WIDER LENS BLOG by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri
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The word “love” is used to represent many different meanings and unpredictable behaviors. Without a doubt, the essence of love represents a sacred connection. But from years of experience as a Family Therapist, I cannot emphasize more, it takes a special “wisdom” to understand how to love.

When we accept that connection or inter-dependency in a significant relationship it is important to be prepared for its many contexts so we can learn to navigate the map of love. It is an exciting adventure to explore the multitude of possibilities it offers us. However, each year when the hype and commercialism of Valentines' Day ends, love can easily take an unacceptable back seat.

The Journey of love

Love is much more than an individual journey. In fact, if we are to love and celebrate its complexity and symbols, we need to understand what it means to be in love. When I work with couples (which I call, "it takes three to know two" in therapy), I initially stress that each articulate how they are committed to the other. This is very revealing. Not only does it help couples understand their connection, but it also opens the door to maintaining and strengthening their relationship.

The next step in exploring the complexity of love is to look at the equity in a relationship. This entails areas of power and gender sensitivity. For example, year after year women in many heterosexual unions do the clear majority of the "Second Shift," the fluid day to day chores and responsibilities to maintain a household. More importantly, in any gender variation that makes up a significant relationship, there needs to be a balance in decision making, parenting, finances, etc. This requires paying attention to the roles that race, class, ethnicity, culture and diversity may play, especially how these factors inform the present and consequent situations of a relationship.

The communication of love

The final step in maintaining a healthy relationship is the art of communication. This is exemplified by what I call the "99 plus ways to create intimacy," which enhance closeness. This includes agreeing to have a "win-win" volley, whenever communicating. I use the image of a ping pong game to illustrate playing together, as though you were committed to keeping the ball on the table, neither spiking the ball.

Expressing, checking and caring for each other, especially in a multitude of ways (i.e. best friends, taking walks, sharing insights, etc.) is true collaboration. At the same time, avoid competitive, negative or

defensive patterns. In a sense, it takes twenty-four hours of dedicated foreplay to be completely intimate. It also underscores the importance of wisdom to appreciate love and its most symbolic representation, the heart.

The symbol of love

In Krista Tippett's book "Einstein's God: Conversations About Science and the Human Spirit," Dr. Mehmet Oz describes the heart as an organ that "doesn't empty blood like a balloon letting out air. That's a very bland view of how the heart functions. It's much more elegant than that. It twists the blood out the way you would wring water from a towel. You watch this muscle twisting and turning...When I saw this organ, I realized why it plays such an important role in our poetry, why it dominates our religion, why we associate the soul and love with a muscle."

The word "love" is more than what we imagine it to be, as is the symbol of the heart, which beats in each of us. The painting above "Heart to Heart" (by my sweetheart, Natasha Rabin) translates that symbol into many languages. Whether it is Valentine's Day or any other day of the year, take time to celebrate the universal joy of love in your one precious heart.