

A More
Loving World

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I.

A

Loveless
World

We begin with a vast and urgent claim: that we have forgotten how to love; that we are living – and suffering – in a loveless world. We have lost ourselves to intolerance, partisanship, cruelty and paranoia. If civilisation ends, it won't be because we have wrecked the climate or let off nuclear warheads; it will be due primarily to a failure of love. Worse, we have little clue what precisely is ailing us; we lack any sharp sense of the sickness choking us. Almost every agony commonly shelved as an issue of economics or politics is at base the result of a shortfall of love. The furies and horrors that unfold on the public stage are symptoms of our collective distempers of the heart.

We should admit that, without any ill intent, we harbour a narrow and impoverished sense of what love really is. We dwell in a loveless world because we have depleted one of the central words in our emotional lexicon.

Love is not, as we have too often come to believe, the special excitement we feel when in a cosy restaurant in the presence of someone unusually beautiful, pure, clever and accomplished. It is

not the thrill of reaching shyly across the table to hold the hand for the first time of a miraculous being in whose eyes we sense a distinct tenderness and capacity to thrill. It is not an exclusive admiration for a favoured person of exceptional virtue. This may be moving and in certain moods important too, but it is not what has the power to redeem civilisation.

The love that counts does not depend on desire or adoration; nor does it focus on an approbation of a single person. Love is first and foremost what we should feel around all the many people it is so tempting to curse and to hate; those whom we instinctively believe are mistaken, ugly, irritating, venal, wrong-headed or ridiculous; those who may have made some truly serious mistakes and offended our moral codes; those who are dismissed by right-thinking opinion and condemned by the mob. To learn to *love* such people is the real accomplishment – and the summit of our humanity.

It is love when we can look at someone who appears misguided, lazy, entitled, angry or proud

and, instead of labelling them despicable, can wonder with imagination and sympathy how they might have come to be this way; when we can perceive the lost, vulnerable or hurt child that must lie somewhere within the perplexing or dispiriting adult.

It is love when we can accept that most of the irksome things that others do stem not from 'evil' or an intention to hurt or wound, but from some form of buried, unexplained and unmasterable anxiety or distress; when we can look upon the human race as benighted and confused, very seldom as wicked.

It is a small but telling instance of love when a toddler throws their supper on the floor and screams that their parent is a poo, and instead of striking back, the grown-up picks them up, calms their fury and forgives them – as they have already done a thousand times before (over the crayon on the wall and the broken radio, the rudeness to Granny and the tantrum at nursery) and discovers the energy to wonder what might have provoked their child to be so difficult: perhaps they are tired or teething, feeling at a low ebb or beset by jealousy towards a

sibling. This attitude is admirable enough when it unfolds in the home, but it is yet greater and more important when it is directed towards the world at large, towards strangers who don't have especially cute cheeks or sparkling eyes – and who might be staring back from a picture in the newspaper on their way to prison, or on a podium having just won an election representing a political party we abhor.

It is love when we grow our capacities for kindness rather than relying on our naturally occurring amiable impulses. Love means making the effort to extend our compassion beyond the bounds of attraction so that we may look generously on those that some might have deemed beyond the pale or 'undeserving': a category that includes not just the low-paid or immigrants but less familiar targets too, like a disgraced CEO, a badly behaved pop star, a shamed pundit or a right-wing magnate. If we understood love properly, when we said we loved a person, we wouldn't necessarily mean that we admired them or felt a kinship with them, but that we had taken steps to grasp the secret story of how they had come to be the way they are; that we had a

handle on all the many difficulties that underpinned their troubling and objectionable sides.

It is love when we accept that the forbearance we ourselves crave, because of how many errors we have made and how foolish we have been, is in fact owed to everyone; when we can apply to others (especially those who are quite unlike us) an idea that feels so plausible in relation to our own flaws: that we can be good people despite having done silly things; that we don't merit condemnation in spite of our unfortunate aspects; that we should not be conflated with our worst moments; that we are still somewhere the little children we once were, crying out for reassurance, comfort, a kindly eye and a second (or a hundredth) chance.

*

All too often, we moralise, castigate, denounce, and punish. We think of ourselves as good people even as we pour contempt on our enemies, indulge our prejudices and blow on the embers of partisanship. We think we are believers in love because we like to go on dinner dates and celebrate wedding anniversaries. But in truth we

risk becoming the most dangerous sorts of people: those disinclined to question the ways in which they hate; those a little too convinced of their own virtue; those who suspect it is invariably someone else's fault.

How might have we allowed ourselves to forget the highest promises of love? Four reasons suggest themselves:

One: The Problem of Romanticism

The difficulties begin with the way the word 'love' has been co-opted by the most powerful ideology to have emerged in the last 250 years. Beginning in Western Europe in the 18th century and then gradually spreading to all corners of the globe, the movement of ideas known as Romanticism has made us imagine that when we talk of love, we must invariably be speaking of the love of two starstruck individuals revelling in a sense of each other's specialness; that love must always be about the longing we feel in the library or the supermarket, at the public swimming pool or on the boulevard when we glance at a graceful person whom our instincts tell us must be the answer to our loneliness and our desire. Romanticism has insisted – not unfairly – that love is the most powerful experience we are capable of, but it has limited its definition to an erotically infused, admiration-based concern of one person for another; it has equated love with a crush.

In working its effect on our minds, Romanticism has benefited from the assistance of the most talented poets, songwriters, painters, novelists and filmmakers. ‘There are some people who would never have fallen in love if they had not heard there was such a thing,’ quipped the 17th-century French essayist, François de La Rochefoucauld – and Romanticism has made it impossible not to hear about, and wait upon, this ‘thing’s’ arrival with the keenest anticipation. It has ensured that when they ride a train, dignified people can in all seriousness hope that they might lay eyes on a wondrous creature somewhere in the countryside between two cities who could, at a stroke, turn into the meaning of their life.

Humans have always felt the swoon of erotic desire, but only thanks to Romanticism’s bold gambit have entire populations begun to think that such passions might constitute the summit of existence.

There might, in forgotten corners, still be lone voices insisting that this is not the whole story or the most important part of love, but these voices have largely lacked reach, powers of persuasion and



Abraham Solomon, *First Class: The Meeting ... and at First Meeting Loved*, 1854

the right tunes. The task is momentous: to remind ourselves that love matters, but not in the way that we have artfully been serenaded to believe.

Two: The Problem of Free Love

Insofar as love has ever broken out of its Romantic veneration of the couple and acquired a more social dimension, in recent times it has involved politics of a very particular sort. Love has been identified with 'free love': with hippies, flower children, bohemians and drop-outs. Love has been a religion espoused by the university-educated offspring of lawyers who dress in colourful robes and chant Eastern mantras.

The tenets of so-called free love have at points been moving and its proponents artistically accomplished; it would take a cynical spirit to deny Janis Joplin or John Lennon their place in the pantheon. But free love has at the same time been unhelpfully self-limiting and unwittingly undermined its own ideals. It has allowed the concept of love as a political force to attract the suspicion of critical swathes of society: anyone who isn't under 35, who isn't left-wing, who isn't interested in non-monogamy and doesn't want to live in a commune.



Holy Man Jam, Boulder, Colorado, USA, 1970. What it could mean to believe ardently in love; a difficult legacy.

It has alienated the extensive ranks of the house-proud and the timid, of accountants and dentists, of those who can't dance and those who hate parties. Even as it made large and stirring claims about changing the world – about love being the answer to war and pain and a force to save us all – it made an interest in love appear synonymous with naïvety and impracticality, with a nebulous fringe one couldn't trust with the car keys, let alone public spending. It both celebrated love and turned it into an adolescent escapade.

The challenge is to take love seriously, not primarily because doing so would be sweet or kind, provocative or vogueish, but because it would be sensible and cautious, because this is what stern military generals and unidealistic bankers should focus on in their vigilant pursuits of prosperity and safety. Love isn't a drug-assisted halcyon fantasy; it is the most effective security treaty and our finest form of planetary life insurance.

Three: The Problem of Christianity

There is one force that has spoken of love with superlative seriousness and the correct kind of depth: Christianity has made love central to its understanding of the destiny and needs of humankind.

It has also advanced a distinctive conception of love: it has argued that it is the essence of love to forgive one's enemies, that we might love a thief or a prostitute, that love-worthiness does not depend on worldly accomplishments, that loving a pauper could be more laudable than paying homage to a king, that to love is to search for the fear and the sorrow beneath the violence and hate of our adversaries and that one should look with charity upon the most apparently abject individuals – who might, at certain moments, include oneself.

The Greeks and the Romans had loved wholeheartedly as well, but they had chosen very different targets for their veneration. They had worshipped strength and beauty, intelligence and

From the classical world to Christianity: the love of Venus (top) to the love of a leper (bottom). Alexandros of Antioch, *Venus de Milo*, c. 130–100 BCE; Cosimo Rosselli, *Sermon on the Mount* [detail], c. 1481–1482.



noble lineage. Their most love-worthy heroes had been Venus and Apollo, paragons of physical and mental virtue respectively. Now Christianity urged us to love vagrants and pus-filled, sore-ridden lepers. It was the first ideological movement in the history of humanity to place prostitutes and disabled people above military leaders and royalty.

Christianity imbued its messages with an unparalleled degree of aesthetic charm and resonance. It employed the finest craftspeople and artists to raise cathedrals in honour of forgiveness, to write cantatas to ritualise clemency and to paint canvases to make palpable the glory of fraternity.

The difficulty for love is that Christianity has been far too successful. Over the centuries, it has monopolised our understanding of what love might involve, turning the notion towards its own particular ends. It has connected up a range of hugely sensible and universal ideas about being charitable, forgiving, kindly and imaginative to a specific story about the sacrifice and heavenly ascent of a supernatural being in the hills of Judea in the mid-Roman period. It has made a specific sort of



Balthasar van Cortbemde, *The Good Samaritan*, 1647

love feel intrinsic to the Christian story rather than belonging to the heritage of all humankind.

Consequently, as Christianity came under pressure from secular forces in the 19th century, as the churches emptied out and faith abated, the love heralded from the pulpits acquired a reactionary aura, tainted by association with ever-more marginalised and implausible doctrines. Talk of brotherly love and compassion acquired the musty and occult smells of the vestry. Exultations of love felt akin to superstition – or, more plainly, witchcraft.

We should respect Christianity's contribution to love without needing to remain forever under the spell of the faith itself. Christianity did not begin humanity's thinking around love; nor can it lay claim to it for eternity. Christianity has been a grand and distinguished host for ideas that are the currency of our species as a whole. There is in reality no necessary connection between love and parables of lepers and Samaritans; these fine tales have been carriers of doctrines that, for our own good, might respectfully jump ship and seek to continue their journeys on more persuasive alternative contemporary vessels.

Four: The Problem of Justice

For many of those who are now most ardently intent on creating a better world, what has replaced the Christian-inspired emphasis on forgiveness and brotherly love is the pursuit of something that feels a great deal more objective, hard-edged and rational: *justice*.

Rather than holding on to sentimental ideas of kindness and empathy, the pursuers of justice have been interested in fairness; they have used the clinical instruments of the law and the forces of public outrage to try to ensure that everyone is finally accorded what they actually deserve.

In the name of justice, it has been decreed that certain sections of society should urgently be given a lot more money and access to better jobs, while others should be stripped of their privileges, ridiculed or thrown into jail. Justice calls for a slide rule of worthiness to be passed over each of our names in order that we can be raised or damned.

No element of a person should be ignored in this reckoning: something we did ten or thirty years ago can decide what we are owed into perpetuity. No misdeed, however minor, should be overlooked. There can be no room for quick apologies or forgiveness, for that would mean attempting to wipe out wrongdoing, which would be an insult to all victims. Even the dead should not escape the full glare of justice.

The pursuit of justice sounds reasonable – until one comes face to face with an uncomfortable fact: that if we all ended up with what we truly ‘deserved’, the world would soon be rendered entirely unliveable. Each of us is such a confusing welter of the good and the bad, the meritorious and the blameable, the admirable and the repulsive that were we to weigh up every soul and throw into the nearest river anyone whose record was not unimpeachably pure, our waterways would quickly become impassable.

There are ways in which we can hope to generate more meritocratic societies: we can adjust educational systems, tax codes and criminal laws. We can tweak reputations and explore how honours

are distributed. But after every effort in this direction has been made, we still need to recognise that we will never create a world that is perfectly just. There is far too much ‘undeservingness’ in each of us; the accidents of fortune are too many, our motives are too hard to discern, the connection between intentions and results are too unstable, we are too often both victims and perpetrators. No one is pure.

Moreover, the attempt to pursue justice at all costs, and the belief that doing so is theoretically possible, has a habit of giving rise to appalling intolerance, for if one really believes that one can be a flawless instrument of righteousness, then there is logically no limit to the degree of rage or the sternness of punishments that can be brought to bear upon ‘wrongdoers’.

To speak of love is not to wish that abusers might have free rein or misdeeds flourish; it is to insist that alongside sensible efforts in the direction of justice, we must have equal – or greater – efforts in the direction of tenderness, forgiveness, atonement and imagination. Our goal should not be to create a world in which everyone gets exactly what they

deserve; it is to try to ensure that as many of us as possible get what we *need*: a different and much more tolerable ambition.

Applied to children, concepts of justice quickly reveal their absurdities. If parents were to give their children exactly what they ‘deserved’, most small people would at a stroke be put out on hillsides to die, given how ill-tempered, pig-headed and wilful they mostly are. But loving parents don’t think this way: they wonder where awkward behaviour comes from, they know how much the child needs to be understood and given opportunities for redemption, they don’t allow yesterday’s tantrum to arbitrate everything about today’s treats; they don’t hold grudges.

Whatever the superficial differences between ourselves and 3-year-olds, in this context we are not much different in what we need from others. We don’t require yet more strict judges; we need loving parents. We need a chance to say sorry and to be allowed to move on; we need not to be forever identified with our gravest mistakes.

The pursuit of justice may spring from the noblest of motives, but it is a quick route to an unloving hell.

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These four forces help to explain the erosion of love in our societies. But there is no reason why they should continue to shape the future. We have the opportunity to generate the more loving world we deserve.