

Devoted to Each Other
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John Greenleaf Whittier wrote these words:

“The letter fails, the systems fall, and every symbol
waned;

the Spirit overseeing all, Eternal Love, remains.”

John Greenleaf Whittier was a Quaker poet and a devoted abolitionist.

He travelled around the country speaking against slavery and published poems and prose against what he saw as a great moral evil -

including this broadside you see here -
with the words:

“Am I Not a Man and a Brother.”

Whittier founded the Liberty Party, which became the Free Soil Party;

he laid the moral and political foundation for the end of slavery.

He’s not just an old poet.

He’s an American hero, and an example of what a life of love and faith means.

I start here to say that yes,
in this month of devotion,

I’m going to spend time talking in this sermon about love,
and I’m going to talk about romantic relationships
and about marriage and kindness and all that stuff.

But if you think love is mushy, think again.

If you think love is weak, know that it is love that broke those chains.

Dr. King said that "hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that."

It is the same power.

It is the same feeling.

As light shining through a crystal becomes many different colors,

love is manifest in many different ways:

in the service of a wider justice,

in friendship

in family relationships

in the appreciation of nature and art and wonder - all that gives us goose bumps and soars our heart

in the feeling of connection and dependence on a holy power beyond our understanding,

and in romance, in committed partnership.

Different colors of light, different forms of love,

but one light, one power, one feeling, one affective emotion, one love, one love.

Many forms, one love.

It is not weak or passive.

It is the prime creative force in the world.

So I don't want you to think that what I have to say today is sentimental, or passé.

Love, manifest as basic human kindness, is the force that creates justice,
that makes beauty, that sustains us and transforms us,
that is worthy of our own lives, our best efforts and our most essential spirit.

Basic human kindness;

for Whittier is right:

“The letter fails, the systems fall, and every symbol wanes;

the Spirit overseeing all, Eternal Love, remains.”

Things pass away. Achievements, the circumstances of the moment,

this cause or that one, this fad, the other,

things pass away;

letters, systems, symbols,

and people, too, and relationships, and more;

things end.

It is the spirit of love that flows through the transient things of the world,

and in the end, I assure you,

it will be this question:

were they a person of love?

A person of basic human kindness?

It will be this question that will matter most - that will matter alone.

The manifestations will vary:

Whittier never married, never had children,

yet, clearly, was guided by love through his whole life.

We devote ourselves to the cause of love in many ways.

One of Whittier's fellow abolitionists was the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker.

Parker railed against slavery and injustice from his pulpit, and - and, not but, and - and one of the great privileges of ministry

is that we get to see and be part of that great rainbow of love,

all the different manifestations, colors of the spectrum.

We remember the dead, sit with the dying, counsel the troubled,

celebrate victories, bless the newborn, and officiate at marriages.

Reflecting on the marriages he knew as a pastor, and giving advice to the newly married,

Parker wrote these words, which are our first reading for today:

It takes years to marry completely two hearts, even of the most loving and well assorted. A happy wedlock is a long falling in love. Young persons think love belongs only to the brown-haired and crimson-cheeked. So it does for its beginning. But the golden marriage is a part of love which the Bridal day knows nothing of.

A perfect and complete marriage, where wedlock is everything you could ask and the ideal of marriage becomes actual, is not common, perhaps as rare as perfect personal beauty. [People] are married fractionally, now a small fraction, then a large fraction. Very few are married totally, and they only after some forty or fifty years of gradual approach and experiment.

Such a large and sweet fruit is a complete marriage that it needs a long summer to ripen in, and then a long winter to mellow and season it. But a real, happy marriage of love and judgment between noble [people] is one of the things so very handsome that if the sun were, as the Greek poets fabled, a God, he might stop the world and hold it still now and then in order to look all day long on some example thereof, and feast his eyes on such a spectacle.

I'm a pastor, like Parker.

And I see the truth of his words:

there is, after the spring and summer and fall, a ripeness, a sweetness, a beauty

in the long and golden marriage,

those who have passed through the gates of illusion and disillusion,

who have learned to grow apart and together as time flows on,

cycling back to each other,

who are themselves with each other,

who aren't "trying so hard" but just being real, and in their realness,

love and kindness and mutuality guide their lives.

It's beautiful.

And it is rare, let's be honest.

We wouldn't admire it so much if it was easy.

But we recognize the truth of Parker's words:

God might stop the world hold it still now and then

in order to look all day long on some example thereof.

Parker was a transcendentalist and a romantic. He gave an almost mystical explanation of what made this long-lasting, happy, complete marriages happen. He spoke in metaphor, which is how we usually speak about such things.

But, as in so many things in the last generation, we now actually can know the answer to this question. We can use data - observations of couples, science, longitudinal studies -

to know, what is it that makes a relationship strong and healthy for many, many years?

What allows some couples to overcome challenges, while others are undone by them?

This isn't a mystery, it turns out, and it isn't some magic formula.

There aren't 10 steps to a healthy marriage, or a healthy friendship for that matter.

There isn't a checklist, or a special trick.

There's one thing.

One thing.

Be kind.

Kindness. That's it.

The kindness that keeps any relationship strong is manifest in a particular:

by the way that people respond to each other,

by the way you respond when your partner does something you don't like,

and by the way you respond when your partner bids for your attention.

The research on this has been led by John Gottman, a psychologist at the University of Washington.

He did two major studies:

in one, they interviewed couples who were newly together about their relationship, while the couples were attached to electrodes.

They measured their heart rate, and found that the couples that were still together, six years later, had low heart rates in those moments - their partner made them more calm and at peace.

The couples who were not still together had elevated rates - being around their partner made them anxious, excited maybe, but anxious.

The second study invited couples to stay in a bed and breakfast - one wired with cameras.

Couples that stayed together, and were happy together, talked to each other differently.

They gave more compliments, and very little criticism.

And when one person would say something, the other person would respond with interest.

The classic example Gottmann used was the bird: (tell it). So Gottman calls these comments "bids" - a bid for attention.

still together - 87% — divorced - 33%

This research has been well covered in a variety of publications, here's an expert from a story last summer in the Atlantic that sums it up very nicely:

Contempt, [Gottman and his fellow researchers] have found, is the number one factor that tears couples apart. People who are focused on criticizing their partners miss a whopping 50 percent of positive things their partners are doing and they see negativity when it's not there. People who give their partner the cold shoulder—deliberately ignoring the partner or responding minimally—damage the relationship by making their partner feel worthless and invisible, as if they're not there, not valued. And people who treat their partners with contempt and criticize them not only kill the love in the relationship, but they also **kill their partner's ability** to fight off viruses and cancers. Being mean is the death knell of relationships.

Kindness, on the other hand, glues couples together. Research independent from theirs has shown that kindness (along with emotional stability) is the most important predictor of satisfaction and stability in a marriage. Kindness makes each partner feel cared for, understood, and validated—feel loved. “My bounty is as boundless as the sea,” says Shakespeare’s Juliet. “My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite.” That’s how kindness works too: there’s a great deal of **evidence** showing the more someone receives or witnesses kindness, the more they will be kind themselves, which leads to upward spirals of love and generosity in a relationship.

There are two ways to think about kindness. You can think about it as a fixed trait: either you have it or you don't. Or you could think of kindness as a muscle. In some people, that muscle is naturally stronger than in others, but it can grow stronger in everyone with exercise. [People in healthy and strong relationships] tend to think about kindness as a muscle. They know that they have to exercise it to keep it in shape. They know, in other words, that a good relationship requires sustained hard work.

I encourage you to read the whole article, or if you want more information about this, the book *The Science of Happily Ever After*. I think I might make it required reading for all the couples I marry. It's important.

I especially note the truth about the "upward spiral" and the "downward spiral."

Imagine one couple. They do love each other, and have a lot in common, but there's a problem. He's a little critical. Not awful, but he can be a bit mean sometimes. So she does something he doesn't like, and he makes a nasty face. Maybe a little cutting remark - not awful, but not kind. Not generous.

She, on the other hand, really doesn't like conflict.
So eventually she shares less and less.
Doesn't engage him in conversation, because she doesn't
want to be criticized.
And he says something - a bid for attention -
but she doesn't reply.
He's convinced she doesn't really care for him,
and so he becomes - you guessed it - more critical.
And the downward spiral continues.

I want to say that in this example, don't assume the
gender roles create that dynamic -
I've seen that the other way, and in couples of two
women or two men as well.
It's not about men are from wherever and women are
from wherever.
It's about kindness, listening, assuming the best, working
that muscle.

The good news is the upward spiral works too.
In another relationship:
She praises his cooking, and thanks him for it.
He listens to her talk about the book she's reading,
regardless of his interest.
She knows he likes country music, and can't stand news
while driving,
so that's what she turns on the radio during the road trip.
He tells her, each day, how much she matters to him.
And when crisis, trouble, challenges come, they are there
for each other.

They trust each other with their heart.
And they are happy.

I've seen that too.
I've seen it.
I wish for it.
Don't you?

Here's more good news:

I know people whose marriage was not so great -
ignoring each other, contempt, distance,
and who made the decision to change it,
and worked that kindness muscle, and it can hurt when
you first use it after a long break;
they worked it, and they changed the direction of the
spiral,
and they made it work, and they're happy together.
Really happy - because they know it could have gone the
other way.
I've seen it. I know it is true, and so do you.

Here's more good news:

I know people who did not get their first, or even second,
marriage to be the healthy, kind, relationship they
wanted.
They tried, but it just didn't happen.
But then they met someone who was kind to them,
and they learned to be kind back,
and they spiraled up together,
and they are happy.

I've seen it. I know it is true, and so do you.

Not perfect.

Happy.

There's no perfect -

and this is one of the important parts about kindness and love:

it takes us as we are,
not perfect; real.

Our expectations are modest, at least they should be.

When we want some perfection, some fake romance-novel, movie-script version of love, we'll almost always be disappointed.

When we look into one another's eyes and hearts with kindness,
we see the whole, real, worthy, imperfect, beautiful person.

From you I receive, to you I give, and together we live.
That's kindness, bid and response, mutual regard.

For theists, and only some of us are,
but for theists I think it is important to say,
this is how the holy, how God, loves us too:
with kindness and mercy,
not with contempt,

but with appreciation for who we really are,
with a spirit of forgiving and inclusive love.

At least that vision of God is how we Universalists see it,

that Immortal Love is forever flowing free, a never-ending sea.

Devotion to each other isn't magic, and it isn't easy, either.

It isn't complicated: but it is work, muscle memory.

It is kindness. Everyday acts of compassion, praise, and caring.

This is the love that sustains a marriage, and a friendship, and, indeed, a community and a nation.

It is how we turn toward justice and peace - by being decent and compassionate human beings.

In 1864, a poet and priest named Richard Trench was appointed the Bishop of Dublin by the Anglican Church in England.

The people of Dublin were not happy.

They wanted an Irishman, not an Englishman, and it eventually caused the Anglican church there to separate from the government -

which we now regard as a good thing.

And Bishop Trench wasn't treated very well in the beginning.

But he was a sweet and caring man, and he loved the people he served, and the ones outside the walls, too.

And when he retired, twenty years later,

he was celebrated by other clergy and lay leaders as a man of wisdom, diligence, and faithfulness.

Love is patient, love is kind . . . you know the words.

It's true.

Devotion is kindness. Kindness is devotion.

It sustains, it repairs, it heals, it gives life, it honors, it is real.

It comes in many forms, for many different people.

It flows freely, unless we try to stop it.

So let love come to you, in its own way, in your own way, and let yourself be known, near and far, as a person of kind devotion.

Richard Trench, the once resented but eventually loved Bishop of Dublin,

wrote the words for our closing hymn,

Make Channels for the Streams of Love.

May we do that, make channels, and let love freely move in us and in the world.

Let us rise in body or spirit and sing together.