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AMERICAN LOVE

"Marilyn Monroe was found dead . . ." the TV newscaster informed us. A day or so later, videotapes of her funeral were items in the evening news report. The camera showed a small crowd of staring, curious people, while the news commentator told us ". . . thousands were expected, hundreds came."

The incident itself was not of great importance as the sordid affairs of the world go. Death is spoken of in large statistical figures, depersonalized for public consumption. An individual's death was, I suppose, in comparison, a small item. But the ironic circumstances gave it a particularly sad and disconsolate cast; a woman had died whose name was spelled L-o-v-e in lights that glittered and reflected from drugstore and department store windows in just about every town in America. Yet who loved her enough to cry for her?

Perhaps someone did; I hope so. May God have mercy on her soul. But it doesn't seem as though the thousands she had pleased and entertained cared or thought they should. If one can say Marilyn was loved by her public, it would be in the sense that something nice to look at or profitable is said to be loved. She was not loved in the proper sense of the word, because real love is based on goodness. It was inevitable that she would lose her ability to please and to be useful. She was loved in proportion to the box office receipts she drew. It is a cruel thing to have such an accurate and visible gauge of one's worth. Entertainers, it seems, must be either strong people or hard people.

One might say that the American public loved her the only way it knew how—a nation whose measure of value is "what do I get out of it?" and "does it work?" is understandably short in spiritual and moral values. Our materialistic and pragmatic culture tends to make love a very difficult topic to write about these days. Please don't misunderstand; I am as well aware as you that one might welter in the sea of books, magazines, and articles devoted to love—to love of self and self-satisfaction. Various techniques of coition, schemes for making money, the right kind of mouth wash, the proper diet, the cigarette with the important extra factor—according to the commercials, these will give you love. No, these will bring payment in kind, a kiss for a kiss, a dollar for a dollar; they will not bring

love. Only goodness begets true love, which is first a love of God and second a love of the people we live with, in God. And since I am mindful that it is difficult to love God Whom we cannot see if we do not practice by loving the people we live with and do see all too clearly, I think it would be good to talk about loving the people with whom we live, and especially about some of the reasons why it seems to be hard for Americans.

Perhaps our puritan forefathers and the noxious mists of Jansenism that still cling about the feet of American Catholicism, along with our heritage of ways of life made austere by the perils of frontier living are partial causes, as some say, perhaps not; but the fact is that Americans (whether especially or peculiarly, I don't know) are very uncomfortable in the presence of deep emotions, especially that of love. We generally shy away from the man who openly expresses strong feelings. He is dealt with summarily as 'radical' or 'funny.' We find him at testimonial dinners or receptions, when it is the order of the day that speeches be made in someone's honor. Everything is fine as long as sentiments are couched in the accepted jocular formula with a touch of lightness (one would not say insincerity) and humor. But then this deeply moved individual rises and attempts to seriously express the heart-felt emotions that he feels, choosing, struggling for the right words and without a smile on his face. The audience stirs and moves, uncomfortable and tense, wishing he would stop. The hearers are embarrassed for him. And with what relief the smiles break forth, what tremendous applause they give the gentleman as he sits; they have listened to him and are so happy—happy he is done.

This attitude is reflected throughout our society and especially with regard to love. Neither life nor observations on it are to be taken too seriously. It is the race that is important, not the goal. What matters is being *On the Road*, going to Chihuahua for kicks as Jack Kerouac saw it, even though one might have to have his St. Therese prayer or Franny's Jesus prayers as comfort during the dark hours between rides, like Linus' security blanket. Everything is fine as long as you can make it a joke, and pass it off; one must not get involved. The very names of those we love, such as friend, wife, husband, are used so loosely that one must always take care to precise such expressions to *true* friend and *first* wife or husband.

Granted the dictum that actions speak louder than words, it does not follow that the words are to be discredited. In our tradition, brave men like Jim Bridger and Daniel Boone who fought against the unknown dangers of the wilderness and the frontier were frequently men of few words, but when they spoke they meant it. It seems that this tradition has

been subject to a bit of editing by subsequent generations. Now we say a great deal, but seldom mean what we say. Certainly love begins with physical attraction; but for love to grow on the soil of physical attraction, an atmosphere of truth and sincerity is an absolute necessity. This means that one must become morally and spiritually good, that one's words as well as his actions must be true. As C. S. Lewis expressed it in *That Hideous Strength*, "You've got to become human before the physical cravings are distinguishable from affections—just as you have to become spiritual before affections are distinguishable from charity."

Virtue is like a plant, it must be cultivated in order to grow. It often needs the benefit of digging and fertilizing. It is not always a hardy plant, not in the beginning anyway. To love and to be loved are both virtues, and therefore must be cultivated. A man striving to grow in virtue, is much like a man trying to climb a mountain. There are two kinds of goals in mountain climbing: the top of the mountain high above, and the more immediate goal such as the next handhold, the ledge one is climbing to, the far side of the precipice. So a man has to keep his eye on the ideal virtue—the example of Christ—which is like the summit. But he must also see the more immediate goals—the use of this specific hour of time—which is like the next handhold. For this he needs to know where to look, and to be sure of the safety and sureness of the grip, confident and trusting in its strength. But in the virtue of love, when the handhold is another person, there is only one way to determine how sure the grip is, that is to be told. By word or by deed, communication must take place, otherwise progress will not be made at all, or only at the great price of uncertainty and painful doubt. Communication can increase the strength of the virtue in both the lover and the loved. Because love is in the will, which is a blind faculty, a man must use his intellect to aim his will at some good thing. Then it is like an automatic tracking radar; if the goal is within its field, the will is inclined toward it.

Before a man can want anything he must see that it is good. The motives and intentions of another person are secret to God and himself unless he choose to express them to another. For a man to love he must see the goodness of his fellowman. Sometimes this is so great that it shines out in his face. At other times, when the subject is a poker-faced American whose face has been dulled by long exposure to crass materialism, one must search for it and learn to overlook the dross. But to know what another really thinks, the other must express it in so many words or actions; he must say 'I love you,' that is, 'I want to do whatever I can to benefit you.'

A quiet word may be enough, perhaps a look or simply a hand reaching out to share some slight burden; whatever it is, it has to be evident to the one saying it and the one listening for it, otherwise it wouldn't be any good, it wouldn't be communication, it wouldn't tell either one anything. Unfortunately our American pace of life seldom leaves us leisure for any but the most efficient means of communication, while our national occupation of status-seeking often blurs our attempts at communication.

Besides conveying the fact of love such communication carries with it the implicit encouragement that love needs. More than knowledge is needed. Love, after all, is a shy thing. The ordinary man may have that bump of self confidence which Thomas Mann saw in him, but for the anxiety-ridden American, it is pretty much a hollow bump. A man who offers himself to another (and what greater gift can one give than one's self?) does so with fear and trembling. For who, in his heart, really thinks he is all that good. A man is never fully delivered from the knowledge of his own secret sins. He needs encouragement. He needs it almost every time he reaches out toward his friend. Time and knowledge come bearing the gift of trust. But some encouragement is always needed to maintain love, just as fire needs a supply of fresh air to live. Small confidences, the minute trusts, the almost casual "Look at this—what do you think?"—they are enough; and the willing rendering of the common courtesies of life—that is enough.

Of course there are extremes when no amount of encouragement is enough on one hand, and no amount of loving attention is enough on the other. But virtue consists in the just proportion, not in the extremes. Loving attention has to be reciprocated in due proportion, according to individual needs. When good is heartily willed to another, a sense of how much is needed will come in its own due time; young love is impetuous, old love is considerate.

One of the external manifestations of our interior selves is our work. And one of the blessings of work is that it is a means for the individual to get outside of himself—to express himself. Two or three working together soon sense their mutual cooperation in producing something which is outside themselves and common to all of them. It is analogous to a couple begetting a child, and just as necessary. Both friendship and marriage are ordered to some sort of co-production, to co-creativity, to co-operation. Friendship's child is sometimes spiritual, as a shared moment of peace or beauty, sometimes concrete, playing a game, writing a book; marriage produces the baby and has the spiritual task of education and

upbringing. Friends and spouses both let their eyes meet above the head of their child; it is a symbol of their closeness. In some way it is part of them both, it binds them nearer to each other.

Perhaps for anyone today, the greatest problem is the sense of responsibility that love demands. Since goodness or virtue, as it is found in the individual, is the basis of a real friendship, it stands to reason that accepting love from someone is to commit one's self to staying good, because this goodness is what makes one lovable.

Commitment is an act of maturity. It is an act of realistic evaluation, of sound judgment and—most important—courageous follow-up. Men generally don't want to tie themselves down, either to being good or to being bad, and the more circumstances force them to some commitment, the more hesitant they are to commit themselves further. The works of Kierkegaard are witness to the great difficulty of getting men to live up to the commitments they have already made. Americans generally content themselves to defending their right to speak, and are not too concerned with the fact that they really don't have much to say.

After all, once one has taken a position or accepted someone's love, one must either stand firm or go back on his word. Goodness has a way about it of always trying to spread itself around. Therefore one must work at maintaining virtue or goodness; work is seldom an attractive thought. On the other hand, to change one's mind is a bit humbling; one is admitting either that the decision was too difficult or that he was wrong. Men don't usually like to do either.

What is more, to accept love from someone marks off limits for a person. One will be associated with this other person for better or worse. And great maturity is needed to accept another's limitations and faults as well as one's own. A man has to be big to look upon life and friendship with the fullness of scope it requires.

It also requires humility to accept love from another. Love can only be given according to the ability of the loved to accept love. For to accept love is an implied admission that one is not self-sufficient (not that any of us are, but we do like to think so). It can be very painful on both sides to find that either too much or too little love was given or received. After all it is much easier to give of one's bounty than to receive in one's poverty. And everyone is poor, when it comes to love, even high-living Americans. Love, like trust and confidence, is an unpurchasable. It can neither be bought nor sold, nor traded, a difficult concept for an American mind. It is hard for a man to admit he is poor even when that very admission opens

the door to wealth. "Pride lies in wait for even good works," wrote St. Augustine. It is much more in keeping with the spirit of the age to declare one's independence, to be in need of no one.

But men do need each other. They are gregarious by instinct, social by nature, friendly by desire. Men have to have others close to them—to tell them they are wrong, to assure them they are right; to stand at their side in honor lest they go too high, and in trouble lest they go too low; to encourage and to caution; to love in return for love; to laugh with, to cry with, even to be solitary with, as St. Augustine said. All of these, Americans find it hard to openly admit. They are not masters of nature, in spite of rockets to the moon.

No pride is as deadly to an individual as corporate pride for it lulls into complacency even the best of men. And this is our danger, that we mistake material bounty for spiritual bounty, sex for love. Men deprived of spiritual consolations seek out material ones. America has been seeking material consolations more and more avidly each day. No number of rockets, no amount of money or power is ever going to fill up the need each of us has to love and to be loved as individual persons. To love men is of our dignity as men, to live our lives for those we love is of our dignity as Christians.

—Brendan Cavanaugh, O.P.

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