

Everyday Love

by Sidney Harris

What we commonly call "love" is a lot of little things rather than one big thing. The big thing may bowl us over at first, but it is the repetitive regularity of the little things that keep love alive and afloat.

The defect with romantic films and stories is that they portray the big thing, which incites the initial feeling, but cannot alone sustain it. Love alone withers without constant watering—and this "watering" is less an emotion than an action and a concern.

When we are young, and yearning for a grand passion to transform our lives, we have such a lofty conception of love that we never think of it in terms of the simple kindnesses of ordinary acts, but as a great abstract idea or feeling, unconnected to reality.

As one of my favorite authors, Paul Tournier, the doctor-preacher-teacher, said in one of his books, "To love is to will the good for another." And the good for another is not necessarily heroic devotion and self-sacrifice, but many small matters that add up over the days and years.

Love is having to say you're sorry time and again, because any two persons living together are bound to step on one another's toes from day to day.

Dr. Tournier takes it even further into particulars:

"Love means writing with enough care so that our correspondent can read it without spending time deciphering it; that is, it may mean taking the time to save him time.

"To love is to pay one's bills: it is to keep things in order, so that the mate's work will be made easier.

"It means arriving somewhere on time: it means giving our full attention to the one who is talking to you. To miss what he or she says can mean that we are more interested in what we are telling ourselves inwardly than in what we are being told.

"To love is to try to speak in his or her own language, even if we have mastered it but poorly, rather than forcing the other to speak ours."

Some of these injunctions may sound trivial, or merely good manners, but what is genuine love but good manners raised to the nth degree?

Love begins as an emotion, but unless it is steadily ratified by acts of the will, it becomes a dead letter as soon as the emotion subsides, and leaves little in its place. This is why the great romantics often have the most tragic, disillusioned or unfulfilled love lives, marked by the heroic gesture, but deficient in the human touch.

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