What Is this Thing Called Love?

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1. **Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds**

There are all kinds of things that we want in life—an interesting job, a cruise to exotic lands, a night on the town, a sports car… And then there is our love life. Again, there are all kinds of things that we want in the way of love. We want a happy love life, we want to be with our beloved, or one might say, we want our beloved. But this thing called love, as the Cole Porter (1929) song continues, is a “funny thing” and “who can solve its mystery?” Indeed, love-related wants are curiously different from more mundane wants.

Let’s start with something that so many of us want—chocolate. Like love, most ordinary mortals don’t just want chocolate, they crave it. Suppose that you grew up on Cadbury, but now you think that you made the discovery of your life—you tasted these nicely wrapped Ghirardelli squares from the Bay Area and you swear that they are the best thing under the sun.

Being a choosy Belgian when it comes to chocolate, I ask what you like about it. You immediately start raving about the velvety texture, the robust bitterness, the aroma of hazelnuts, and so on. I understand your passion. But if that’s what you like about chocolates, then I have news for you. Try these pralines from Daskalidès, manufactured in Ghent—they score higher than Ghirardelli on all the dimensions that you mention.

You are somewhat incredulous, but you are willing to give it a go. And indeed, you fall head over heels for Daskalidès on first bite. It is to die for! Ghirardelli pales in comparison. And so, you trade up. Ghirardelli is a thing of the past—the future with Daskalidès is bright.

And there are simpler ways to wean you off Ghirardelli. I might suggest you put on your reading glasses and read the ingredients of the Ghirardelli chocolate. You notice the soy lecithin among the additives. For some reason or other you have some misgivings about soy additives and you turn your back on Ghirardelli.

Or Ghirardelli may decide to source its cocoa from a different supplier. It just doesn’t taste the same anymore to your discerning palate, and, again, you say farewell to Ghirardelli.

In all these cases, we wouldn’t bat an eyelid. You liked Ghirardelli yesterday. But you traded up, you learned something new about Ghirardelli, or Ghirardelli changed. You don’t like it anymore today. This is no reason to say that you didn’t truly like Ghirardelli yesterday.

But compare this to love. Suppose that you tell me that you have found a new beloved. You are besotted and beguiled—you hear the angels singing. I ask you—what is so great about them? You are more than happy to tell me all out about how beautiful, witty, charming, and intelligent your new beloved is.

As with Ghirardelli, I am happy to dispense good advice. If that’s what you find so attractive in your newfound Mr. or Ms. Right, I invite you along to come and meet Mr. or Ms. So-Much-More-Right—someone who has all these nice character traits to an even greater extent. We set up a date, you agree with my excellent judgment as a match maker, swiftly trade up, and live happily ever after.

Trading up from Ghirardelli to Daskalidès did not stand in the way of saying that you *truly* liked Ghirardelli yesterday. But trading up from Right to So-Much-More-Right makes one less confident about your love for Right yesterday. If you were so beguiled and besotted, why did you even take me up on setting up a date? And how is it that you were so easily convinced? You have to admit: Maybe you did not *truly* love Right after all. To quote a well-worn line from Shakespeare’s (1914) Sonnet 116: “Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds.”

Love should also be resilient to learning—at least more resilient than your fancy for Ghirardelli. As we become more acquainted with our beloved, we may learn things about them that would have stopped us from falling in love. But now that we are where we are, it shouldn’t matter. If this new knowledge can undo our love, one might question how true it was.

This is a favorite recipe of tragic love stories. In Kate Chopin’s (1893) short story “Désirée’s Baby,” Armand’s wife Désirée was adopted and is of uncertain heritage. When he notices that their infant son has African features, he sends her and the child away. In Thomas Hardy’s (1891) *Tess of the d’Urbervilles: a Pure Woman*, Angel learns on their wedding night that Tess had a child out of wedlock and leaves her. One questions whether Arman truly loved Désirée and whether Angel truly loved Tess. As a contrast, take the young love that blossoms between Jimmy and Dil in the movie *The Crying Game* (1992). Then Jimmy learns that Dil is transgender and anatomically male and Dil learns that Jimmy was the cause of her former lover’s death. Though they would never have fallen in love with each other had they known this at the outset, they cannot let go of their love.

Wendy Cope (1992) has a two-line poem entitled “Two Cures for Love”: “Don’t see him: don’t phone or write a letter. The easy way: get to know him better.” The poem is tongue-in-cheek. Indeed, it sounds fully reasonable that, as we learn unwelcome information about our beloved—which is due to come—love will wither. But true love is less than fully reasonable and is meant to be resilient in the face of unwelcome information.

Love should also be resilient to change. There is no problem with turning our back to Ghirardelli with a change in their cocoa supplier. Nothing stays the same—Ghirardelli is just not what it used to be. But no person stays the same either—lovers tend to change on us as well. But here, again, is where love differs from our passion for chocolates. We expect love to be able to weather change—at least to some extent.

This is what is called the *constancy* of love. (*Cf.* Soble 1990: 203-36 and 2008 [1998]: 173-9.) If alleged love is subject to trading up or is brittle in the face of learning unwelcome news or unexpected changes, we conclude that the alleged love was not quite true love. It’s a mark that something was absent. It is this constancy that sets love apart from other desires, longings, and passions—even from cravings for chocolate.

1. **How do I love thee? Let me count the ways**

There are three grand and ancient models of romantic love. They go back to respectively Socrates’ and Aristophanes’ speeches in Plato’s (2008) *Symposium* and to the opening lines of St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13 in the Bible.

*Eros.* Love is born in response to finding attractive features in a person. This can take many forms. Lorelei Lee, the character played by Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) says “Don’t you know that a man being rich is like a girl being pretty?” Diane Keaton says that there was chemistry between her and Woody Allen “because it was Woody Allen and because he was funny.” (Miller 2015) Or, maybe less controversially, one may find someone sensitive, charming, attentive, willing to listen to us …

This is the model that we find in Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium*. Socrates actually states that all he knows about love he learned from Diotima, the woman from Mantinea, who, he says, is “a woman wise in this and in many other kinds of knowledge.” In keeping with the tradition, we will call this the *eros* model of love. There is a bit of mission creep in Socrates’ speech. It starts with an appreciation of what is beautiful and good in one’s beloved, but a minute later, we move onto the beauty and the good in the laws and institutions of the city, in the practice of philosophy, and finally, to what it means for something to be beautiful and good. We let Socrates and Diotima go down this metaphysical alleyway on their own. All we need is the idea that romantic love is constituted by an appreciation for the wonderful features of the beloved. The motto for this model might be—*to love is to find one’s beloved great*.

*Agape.* There is a love that wants to take care of the other, to bring out the best in them. This love is not a response to great things in the other. Rather, it aims to bring about great things. It does not seek value, but rather it confers value.

Here is some Theology 101. When we say that we are loved by God, clearly the *eros* model would not be fitting: God is not gently looking down, impressed and beguiled by all the greatness He sees in mortals roaming around on earth. Rather, He despairs seeing all this sinfulness in motion. However, it is through His loving us that he aims to lift us up and make us into better people, provided we are receptive to His love.

St. Paul praises this kind of love in 1 Cor. 13: 1-7. He uses the Greek word *agape*, which is translated in Latin as *caritas*. It is a love that is self-forgetful, that sacrifices its own interests for the well-being of the beloved. It is also a love of commitment, no matter what comes. Let the motto be—*to love is to make one’s beloved great*.

*Shared Identity.* Before Socrates takes his turn in the *Symposium*, the playwright Aristophanes tells a myth about how humans in times long gone were like spheres and had two pairs of legs and arms, two heads and two genitals – some were double male, some were double female and some were male-female. They revolted against Zeus and as a punishment Zeus split them in two. And that is the human form as we know it. But these humans have an irresistible longing to find their original other halves. And depending on the original form, this longing is for our gay, lesbian or straight other half.

The myth underscores that we have a need to find someone in life who complements us. Lovers create a shared self or a joint identity. They go through the world not as two separate people, but as one in body and soul. They think of themselves as such and they want to be seen by the world as such. The motto for this model: *to love is to become one with one’s beloved*.

These models are not mutually exclusive. In Sonnet 43 in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1850b) asks to “count the ways” in which she loves her beloved. Relationships tend to display a bit more or less of an *eros* focus,of an *agape* focus, or of a shared-identity focus. Single-model relationships tend to be pathological. With too much *eros* comes infatuation. With too much *agape* comes a loss of self. And with too much of a shared-identity focus comes clinginess. One needs a mix for a healthy relationship. Let us look in more detail at each of these models and see how they fare in the face of the constancy of love.

1. **Love, so wrought, may be unwrought so**

Let us start with the *eros* model. Loving people for their features causes trouble for the constancy of love. Features may change. We may realize that we misjudged our beloved due to the infatuation of young love. Or, someone may cross our path who displays the attractive features to a greater extent. If the *eros* model is all there is to love, then what is there that could keep us from saying that we have reached the end of the line?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s (1850a) Sonnet 14 in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* puts the worry very aptly:

(…) Do not say,

“I love her for her smile—her look—her way

Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought

That falls in well with mine, and certes brought

A sense of pleasant ease on such a day”—

For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may

Be changed, or change for thee—and love, so wrought,

May be unwrought so.

Browning exhorts her beloved not to love her on the *eros* model of love. All the features he may love her for may change in her. Or her beloved may come to see them differently. And that, she fears, would mean the end of love which she wishes to avoid at all costs.

But the *eros* model may have its own defense mechanisms against short horizons built into it. Think back to the Lorelei Lee observation that women love men for their money just as men love women for their beauty. Maybe true love is rooted in the appreciation of valuable features—as the *eros* model stipulates—but certain features just cannot play this role. If we fall for someone because of their money or beauty, then one would be hard-pressed calling it true love.

This is fair enough, but then, what sort of features *can* play this role? What sort of features are such that their appreciation could be a ground for true love? There are many candidates but none of them are unproblematic.

In *He that Loves a Rosy Cheek*, the 17th century English poet Thomas Carew (1875) exhorts us not to love “a rosy cheek, a coral lip or star-like eyes,” because these are bound to fade. Rather, it is “a smooth and steadfast mind, gentle thoughts, and calm desires”that can “kindle never-dying fires.” This is similar to Socrates’ ascent in the *Symposium*: First the novice in the art of love finds beauty in the body of the beloved and at a later stage “he will consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form.”

The suggestion is that one should love a person for their character traits. Character traits may be somewhat less ephemeral than looks, but they provide far less than the constancy one would expect from love. Browning does not want to be loved for *speaking gently* either, because she may not speak gently tomorrow, or her beloved may not think of her as speaking gently tomorrow.

People change, for better or for worse. Those of us who have nurtured a loved one through depression know all too well how little can be left of the person we fell in love with. If love is not to fade, character traits may be as fragile as beauty or money. It may be wiser to focus on character traits, because desirable character traits are typically a better predictor of long-term marital satisfaction. Similarly, it may be wiser to choose a place to live on grounds of its social scene or the opportunity for satisfying work, rather than on grounds of its natural beauty or the opportunity to make lots of money. But if natural beauty and riches really matter to *you*, then why not? And if the beauty of the outward form in a partner or the posh life-style that they promise really matters to *you*, then why not? You may come to realize that you were mistaken in your assessment of the relative importance of these features. But whether it’s a *rosy cheek* or a *smooth and steadfast mind* that kindles your love does not make that love any more or less true.

But maybe we love people not for having certain features—bodily, monetary, character, or what have you—but for the *particular mode* in which they display those features. I adore my beloved not for, say, being a great skier, but for the way in which they ski. Nobody takes those turns quite the way they do. It’s not how good of a skier they are, it’s the mode in which they are a great skier that stirs those butterflies inside.

This may guard against trading up. My beloved may not measure up to the Olympic skier I just met in the lounge, but the Olympic skier’s mode of skiing does not catch my fancy the way my beloved’s does. Hence this appeal to the particularity of the feature may guard against trading up. But it is less clear that it will guard against change. After a few ligament ruptures little may be left of their oh-so-special way of taking those turns. Maybe this mode of skiing may live on in the other things they do in life and this is what guards against change. But if we go this route then it all becomes a bit mysterious—the ground for love becomes a kind of *je ne sais quoi*.

There is another clue in William Butler Yeats’ *For Anne Gregory* (1933). The poem is a dialogue between two lovers in which the beloved refuses to be loved for her yellow hair—those “great honey-coloured ramparts at my ear.” Rather, she wants to be loved “for herself alone.” But what is it to love a person for themselves alone? There is a mystical and not so mystical reading.

Let’s start with the not so mystical. There are certain features of ourselves that we identify with, that we think of as defining us, and typically these are also features that we are proud of. The real Anne Gregory was a young child with flaxen hair when Yeats wrote his poem featuring the grand-daughter of the Irish playwright Lady Gregory. But let’s think of an imaginary Anne Gregory. She may not have cared much for her yellow hair. So, to be loved for it is not very satisfying. Maybe our imaginary Anne Gregory may have thought of herself as an intellectual or an artist. She would not mind being loved for being just that. When she says that she wants to be loved for herself she means for something that she stands for, something that she takes herself to be all about.

It is true that people like to be loved for what they take pride in. But it is one thing to be loved by the world and another thing to be loved romantically. It seems to me that there is, at least for most people, a separation of spheres. I want to be admired, appreciated, and loved for one set of features at work, for another set of features in my community, and yet another set of features by my beloved. Venus Williams may yearn to be loved by the world for her tennis prowess. Adele is desperate to be adored by her fans for her vocal talent. But I doubt that they want to be so loved by romantic lovers.

So here is a more mystical reading of being loved for oneself alone which needs a bit of a metaphysical warmup.

Think of the universe as a big bag. Grab something out of the bag. Put it back. Grab one more time. If both objects you grabbed have precisely the same features then you grabbed twice the very same thing. This principle goes back to the 17th century German philosopher Leibniz and is called the *Identity of Indiscernibles*.

The 20th century English-American philosopher Max Black did not like the principle much. Suppose, he said, there is a universe that is void except for two blue balls of the same size and composition circling around each other. Then both objects have exactly the same features, but they are not identical—they are clearly distinct objects. There seems to be something wrong with Leibniz’s *Identity of Indiscernibles*. (Forrest 2010)

To defend Leibniz, we step back a few centuries to the 13th century Scottish philosopher Duns Scotus. Aside from all of its run of the mill features such as being blue, weighing 20 pounds, being sphere-shaped, etc., each of Max Black’s balls also has the property of being this very ball. One ball has the property of being this very ball and the other ball has the property of being that very ball. Each ball has its own *primitive this-ness* or, following Duns Scotus, its own *haecceity.* (*Haec* is a Latin form for *this.*) It is in virtue of their respective *haecceities* that the balls in Max Black’s universe are discernible and hence we can comfortably say, on Leibniz’s principle, that they are distinct.

Let’s return to Anne Gregory now. In matters of love, Anne Gregory does not want to be loved for her yellow hair, her smarts, her gentle demeanor, or whatever run of the mill property you might want to add. She wants to be loved for being her, for being the unique person that she is. She wants to be loved for her *haecceity*, in Duns-Scotus style.

This is a common theme in science fiction—such as in the episode “Be Right Back” in *Black Mirror* (2017). We may be able to create a replica of one’s beloved who is just as good-looking, sensitive, smart, witty, with exactly the same memories and dreams, but it wouldn’t do: What they are lacking is being the very person whom you loved before.

The more sober-minded will think it stark raving mad to bring in such bizarre features as *haecceities* to account for the fact that people do not wish to be loved for any other feature than being the unique person that they are. But when love is the prize, maybe a bit of metaphysical fairyland is just what we need.

In short, the quest for a special set of features that can ground true love and that provide a basis for constancy is quite elusive. We tried character features, modes, identity-constituting features, and *haecceities*. They all have some attraction, but none of them are entirely convincing.

1. **Only God, my dear, could love you for yourself alone**

We now turn to the *agape* model. After Anne Gregory kicks up a fuss about wanting to be loved for herself alone, her interlocutor responds:

“I heard an old religious man

But yesternight declare

That he had found a text to prove

That only God, my dear,

Could love you for yourself alone

And not your yellow hair.”

There are two ways to understand this. One reading understands “for yourself” as indicating the *ground* of love: God loves us because we are the unique individuals that we are. But there is also another reading. Think of the expression: “Buy something nice for yourself.” Here you are meant to be the beneficiary. So, if God loves us for ourselves, we are the beneficiaries of His love—He loves us with the aim of lifting us up.

Is it true that *only* God can love in this manner*?* *Agape* is an ideal of love and maybe only God can live up to it. But nonetheless, it is held up as an ideal to strive for in interpersonal relationships as well as in romantic love.

In *Love and Responsibility*,Karol Woytila (Pope John Paul II) holds it up as a model of romantic love in marriage:

We love the person complete with all his or her virtues and faults, and up to a point independently of those virtues and in spite of those faults. The strength of such a love emerges most clearly when the beloved stumbles, when his or her weaknesses or even his sins come into the open. One who truly loves does not then withdraw his love, but loves all the more, loves in full consciousness of the other’s shortcomings and faults (…) (1993: 135)

This *agape* model of love also finds expression in popular culture in Tammy Wynette’s (1969) *Stand by your Man*: “it’s hard to be a woman giving all your love to just one man. You’ll have bad times and he’ll have good times, doin’ things that you don’t understand. But if you love him you’ll forgive him …’cause after all he’s just a man.”

St. Paul writes that faith, hope and love abide and that love is the greatest. (1 Cor. 13: 13) What makes love in the form of *agape* abide? There are several grounds for its constancy.

First, it is a love that is not drawn out by attractive features of the beloved. Hence there is no problem with features changing, with learning about the darker sides of one’s beloved, or with any threat from someone crossing one’s path who exemplifies the features you fancy to a greater degree. Features simply don’t matter from the get-go.

Second, *agape* is about commitment. I once attended a wedding sermon in which the minister said: “You fell in love; you were in love: and now you are saying, I will love.” One takes on the commitment of taking care of one’s beloved and living up to this commitment is a matter of the will. It is a love that is not contingent on the good fortune that passions won’t fade.

Third, love is unconditional on the *agape* model. Love won’t fade when one’s beloved errs, shows weakness, or in whatever way does not live up to expectations. It is a love that aims to build up the beloved. Hence the lower the beloved falls, the greater the call. It is like an ardent sports fan who is not let down when the team goes through a losing streak. *Agape* is not a fair-weather love.

But the constancy of *agape* comes at a cost. Here are some trouble-spots for *agape*.

First, a model of love that exhorts us to bear it all can become self-destructive. To protect our mental health, its proponents tend to throw in a qualifier that functions as an exit clause. Note how John Paul II throws in “up to a point”—love persists in spite of the beloved’s faults, *up to a point*. In Shakespeare’s (1994) Sonnet 116, love “bears it out to the edge of doom”—but it doesn’t follow the beloved beyond this edge. Nonetheless, *agape* may have its boundaries, but it can come dangerously close to the pitfalls of co-dependency and abusive relationships.

Second, how can an agape-model lover respond to the simple question from her beloved: Why do you love me? She might say, because I want to take care of you. But why, the beloved persists, do you want to take care of me, rather than of somebody else? What might our agape-model lover respond? Because our paths crossed? That just seems a bit too *whatever*. Because I saw that you needed me? That seems a bit patronizing, or even worse, it sounds like a handyman who is keen to buy a fixer-upper. What would bring a spark to the beloved’s eye is if the lover would tell her what makes her so special. But if they are genuine about this, if it’s more than some sweet nothing, then we are back with the *eros* model.

1. **For one is both and both are one in love**

Finally, there is the *shared-identity* model. (Nozick 1989 and Solomon 1981) Aristophanes’ myth tells the story of how humans try to find their other halves to reunite with them and go through life in the form they were before they were punished by Zeus. Philosophers talk about the *phenomenology* of love. What they mean by this is that there is something that it is like to be in love, that loves strikes us in particular ways, that love appears to us to be one way or another. The myth of Aristophanes ticks a lot of boxes when it comes to this phenomenology of love.

First, love is about forming an extended self or a shared identity with the beloved. There is the line from Christina Rossetti’s (1881) poem “I loved you first: but afterwards your love” stating that “one is both and both are one in love.” Or, think of Catherine’s speech in Emily Brontë’s (1847) *Wuthering Heights* in which she proclaims: “I *am* Heathcliff! He’s always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being.”

The extended self can take various forms. It can be a kind of merging—the individual selves are permeable and they fuse as two cells becomes one. The old selves are no more. There is one new self that has absorbed the selves that once were. The singletons are gone; only the dyad remains. Aristophanes in the *Symposium* seems to favor this idea of merging. He imagines Hephaestus, the god of blacksmiths proposing to weld the two lovers together. And the lovers wholeheartedly agree to this—they wish to “be melted into one and remain one here and hereafter.”

Kahlil Gibran (1923) warns against this loss of the individual self in *The Prophet*. One should drink together, but not from the same cup. One should eat together, but not from the same loaf. And then he suggests various images in which greatness is reached by joint action that involves individuality—such as the pillars that make a temple, or the strings of a lute that stand by themselves yet jointly create music. And also, a respectful distance helps the cause of love—the cypress and the oak do not grow into each other’s shadow.

We find a similar warning in Shel Silverstein’s children’s books *The Missing Piece* (1976) and *The Missing Piece meets the Big O* (1981). A rock is trying to find its missing piece and a missing piece is trying to find its rock in so that the two of them can merge and roll, but the mission ultimately fails and they find happiness without merging.

If we wish to preserve the individual self, then we can envision love in one of two ways. Draw an outer circle that represents the individual self and place a smaller circle of the shared self within it. Or draw an outer circle that represents the shared self and place a smaller circle of the individual self within it. These pictures are suggestive. Robert Nozick (1989) thought that there was a gender difference, with men typically identifying with the former model and women with the latter model. Men make room for the *we* in their lives, whereas women find a place for the *I* within the relationship.

Second, love strikes us as being fated. Think of the 20s jazz tune *It Had to Be You* by Isham Jones (1924). It’s not that our paths just happened to cross and we found out that we were a good match. Rather, once we met, we knew right away that this was the match that was waiting for us all along. There is no room for maybe. There are 7.6 billion people on the globe and the only right match is between you and your beloved – nothing else will do, it just had to be you. Lovers may even tell stories about how it seemed as if someone was pulling the strings, providing a little tug left and right to bring back the two halves that were once united.

This also squares with Aristophanes’ explanation of sexual preference. We do not choose our sexual preference. They are simply given to us because they are contingent on whether we came from a unisex or mixed-sex original unit.

Third, we feel that we have always known our beloved. “I knew I loved you before I met you” is a line in the chorus of a top hit “I Knew I Loved You” by *Savage Garden* (1999). Lovers sense that they were already present in each other’s dreams before their paths crossed. They did not just find someone who matched their dreams—rather, they already knew this very person in their dreams.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1947) plays on this theme in the short story *Eyes of a Blue Dog*. It is a conversation between two lovers who repeatedly meet in their dreams. Since they hit it off so well, they agree to find each other in the real world, with the phrase “Eyes of a Blue Dog” as a kind of code. But tragically, nothing comes of it, because the man cannot remember his dreams and the woman goes mad in her pursuits to find the lover of her dreams in real life.

This feeling of prescience or déjà vu is also present in Aristophanes’ myth. We knew each other already before we met, because my beloved is my long-lost love from the time before time began when we were still one.

1. **The Scent of Bitter Almonds**

“It was inevitable: The scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love.” This is the opening line of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s (1988) *Love in the Time of Cholera*. So, what if love is unrequited? What if love that was once requited is no longer so? Each of our models has its own response to the pangs of love and forges a path forward.

On the *eros* model, loving one’s beloved is like loving a pretty awesome Lamborghini is for a car lover. And losing love is like losing that pretty awesome Lamborghini. Something great—that is, something with the greatest features—just slipped through my fingers. Maybe the car was even tailor-made, a kind of *pièce unique*. And that is what is lost, never to return.

On the *agape* model, the pangs of love are less about loss of value, but rather about the loss of a project and about failure. It is as if I was trying single-mindedly to save the family firm, working night and day, but I finally had to admit defeat and declare bankruptcy. There is this nagging doubt that if I had just tried a bit harder, I could have succeeded, and that maybe I just did not love quite enough.

The *shared-identity* model is the cruelest of them all. The loss of love is like a death—it is a death of the shared self. Emily Dickinson (1896) compares episodes of parting with death in the poem “My Life Closed Twice before its Close.” “Parting,” she says, “is all we know of heaven and all we need of hell.” And this death of the shared self affects the individual self in the deepest way. How it affects us depends on whether we see the shared self as a merged self, as having a place within the individual self, or as encompassing the individual self.

On the model of merged selves, the individual selves are ripped apart and are left wounded. On the model of the shared self within the individual self, what is left is a hole, a gap, an emptiness. On the model of the individual self within the shared self, the individual self is left without a compass or a mooring place—it is adrift in a world that makes no sense because the shared self that gave it meaning is gone.

What adds to the trauma, is the image that love is fated. If it had to be you, then it is not just *a* death, it is *the* death of the one and only shared self that there can ever be. It is the sense that there is only one missing piece that provided for the right fit that makes the loss irreparable. It is not a loss of something of great value as in the *eros* model. The relationship may even have been arduous from the get-go. It is not a loss of project as in the *agape* model. A doomed love may never even have reached the stage of being a project to bring to fruition. Rather, it is the sense that there is something deeply amiss with the world, because for whatever reason, what had to be so, cannot be so—the world below does not live up to what is written in the stars.

There is no right model for being in love. The revelers at the *Symposium* and St. Paul all have something to add to the mixture. At different times in life, depending on where we come from, whom we are with and where we want to go, it’s good to hold up some models and downplay others. Neither is there right model to deal with unrequited love or love lost. On the *eros* model, we set off to find a new love that will be equally wonderful. On the *agape* model, we search for someone new to give our heart to. On the *shared identity* model, we tell ourselves that we must have misread those stars and trust that time will heal all wounds. There is no telling what may work when, for whom and with whom.

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