

« The Art of Loving »

By Deepak Bansal

Is Love a skill to be cultivated, or is it an innate ability we all possess?

In his 1956 book "The Art of Loving," Erich Fromm, a German-American psychologist made a compelling case that Love is an art that needs development and cultivation.

The exploration of Love is as ancient as human civilization itself. The English word "Love" is derived from Germanic forms of the Sanskrit word '*lubh*' (desire) and has been broadly defined, drawing on Greek concepts of *Eros* (desire and passion), *Philia* (friendship and loyalty), and *Agape* (universal compassion).

This essay will examine How Love has been transformed in the modern world, what Love is, and how we can cultivate it.

a) How the Modern World has shaped "Love"

Love comprises three components: the lover, the beloved, and the space in between. According to Erich Fromm, in today's society, Love faces problems in all three areas.

"Lover" as Being Loved:

In our pursuit of being loved, we often adopt society's preferred traits to become more desirable, such as being attractive, successful, or cultured. While improving oneself is commendable, doing so solely to be loved can undermine the authenticity of these endeavors, creating a sense of inadequacy. Furthermore, societal standards of desirability are ever-changing, which can lead individuals to chase fleeting trends, undermining a more profound and stable sense of Love. By allowing societal judgments to dictate our worth, we risk losing touch with authentic Love.

"Beloved" - as an Object:

Conversely, treating Love as an object can be equally problematic. This perspective can manifest in viewing Love as a means to an end, a solution to improve oneself, or a state that, once achieved, makes life complete. In Plato's "Symposium," Aristophanes suggests that humans were originally dual beings split apart, forever longing to find their other halves. This narrative can sometimes transform into a materialistic pursuit, where the search for a partner resembles the acquisition of commodities like cars or fashion items. Whether in the context of arranged marriages fulfilling material needs or modern Love becoming a quest for sensational experiences, Love is misconstrued as a mere fulfillment of desire.

"The Space in Between":

Freud suggested that sexual impulses, generated chemically within organisms, underpin what we term 'Love.' However, reducing Love to mere sexual chemistry neglects its depth and sustainability. What happens when the initial impulse fades? If we adhere to this reductionist view, the transient nature of sexual attraction can lead relationships to falter. A meaningful

connection should transcend these initial impulses, offering a foundation robust enough to withstand the ebb and flow of desire.

b) What is Love?

Love, according to Socrates, is the desire for perpetual possession of the good, transcending mere temporal or physical absence. Through what he termed the '*Ladder of Love*,' one can evolve from base desires to an appreciation of Love as a formative philosophical pursuit. From a Platonic perspective, Love encourages us to seek out and cherish absolute beauty, an enduring and unchanging ideal.

Erich Fromm identified several forms of Love, each with their efficacious and deficient aspects:

- *Self-Love*: Contrary to being mere narcissism, healthy self-love is foundational, enabling us to love others effectively.
- *Brotherly/Sisterly Love*: This universal Love suggests that if we can Love one individual truly, we can extend this Love to all humanity, although it may lack the intimacy and depth found in personal relationships.
- *Motherly Love*: Characterized by its unconditional nature, this form of Love nurtures and fosters growth and independence.
- *Fatherly Love*: Often contingent on certain conditions, such as achievement or obedience, fatherly Love can motivate but also constrain.
- *Erotic Love*: This form distinguishes itself by the depth of connection and selective intimacy that goes beyond mere physical attraction.
- *Transcendental Love*: Representing the pinnacle of Love, this form transcends individual or romantic Love, embracing a universal or divine Love for the absolute.

There are various forms of Love in the relational field, and if we go up the *Ladder of Love*, it transmutes into new forms. Some say Love cannot be grasped or intellectualized but only felt.

c) How Can We Practice the Art of Loving?

Answering how to practice the art of loving transcends simplistic, formulaic responses. It demands presence, authenticity, and a commitment to growth:

- *The "Lover"*: Love is a union under the condition of preserving one's integrity: There is an inherent freedom and integrity in Love. It is an active power to unite and still retain individuality, the integration of paradoxes. It is neither about possessing another nor about losing the self but dancing in between, and this can only happen if there is no attachment, no expected deliverable from Love; it is just it!
- *The "Beloved"*: Love implies care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge towards the beloved. Love is an active concern for the life and the growth of that which we Love. Love is the ability to see another person; Love is respecting the freedom of another person as we respect ours; Love is a curiosity to know another person.

- *The Space in Between:* Love is about the development of Listening, Objectivity, Humility, and Rational faith. Love is listening to the space in between objectively, acknowledging with humility that we all have our own trauma to process, and we would never know the other person. Love is also about believing in something in between, even though we do not have all the data points. Rational faith is the ability to change ourselves and in-between space when we have those data points.

Elbert Hubbard said, “*The one who doesn’t understand your silence will never understand your words.*” The intellectual side and intuitive side of our personality need to be properly developed and integrated to practice Love. This requires attention, concentration, and effort. It is a continuous journey of learning, unlearning, and relearning, and when we embark on this journey, in our relationally, we might even find Plato's transcendental Love of Beauty and Goodness

References:

- a) Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving*
- b) Plato. *Symposium*
- c) Chaudhuri, Haridas. *The Philosophy of Love*