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Love, Risk, and the Journey Home

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Abstract

"Love, Risk, and the Journey Home" is an essay that explores two topics at the same time: *how* I teach and *what* I teach in my course, "Love: The Concept and Practice." It is, then, an essay on both the pedagogy and substance of love. There is still another way to describe this essay. It is the story of finding myself disillusioned by the academic life I had chosen, and the teaching of a course that returned to me a sense of hope for my vocation and avocation. When I had lost my way, "Love: The Concept and Practice" helped me get back home. I needed a new course, a new way for myself. W. H. Auden once said, "A professor is someone who talks in someone else's sleep." I was becoming that professor. I needed to wake up my students and myself in the process. I needed to think anew about what is vital and required for a course.

In his poem, "Two Tramps in Mud Time," Robert Frost describes his handing over to two homeless, hungry men the work he himself enjoyed—splitting good oak on a cool, April day. His claim to the work was love; the vagabonds' claim to it was need. "And where the two exist in twain / Theirs was the better right—agreed."[1] Frost concludes his poem with a meditation on the importance of uniting our loves and needs, when possible:

> But yield who will to their separation,
>
> My object in living is to unite
>
> My avocation with my vocation

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As my two eyes make one in sight.

Only where love and need are one,

And the work is play for mortal stakes,

Is the deed ever really done

For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Such intermingling of "avocation and vocation," of love and need, conviction and work, is an apt description of the life of many liberal arts college and university professors. For many of us, our work is not only a job—a means to a paycheck. Of course, sometimes our work is quite pedestrian: attending that predictable meeting, writing the informational email, and perhaps even teaching that drab required course. But there are times when avocation joins vocation, and we rediscover the initial love that sent us down our paths as educators. These occasions or episodes can feel like a journey home. We remember who we are, why we do what we do: why we care so deeply about this enterprise called higher education. Then we check our email, and likely fall back into forgetfulness. But our hope is in our frequent awakening. We can come home again and again.

This article is about one such journey home. It was a risky journey (as are many journeys home). It is the story of finding myself disillusioned by the academic life I had chosen, and the teaching of a course that returned to me a sense of hope for my vocation and avocation. When I had lost my way, the course that helped me get back home was titled, "Love: The Concept and Practice."

Love: The Concept and Practice

Course Description

A study of love (in classical and modern texts and in film) that provides a window into a host of religious and ethical issues. Topics include the potential conflict between earthly and transcendent love; love of the natural world and of the everyday; the nature of friendship, romance, marriage, and love of self, among other types of love. Although the scope is love in the West, there will also be a modest comparative component.

Teaching a course on love is risky business. As a professor, you may damage your reputation as a serious scholar who teaches classes on serious topics. You may even damage the reputation of your institution (imagine the conservative social media tag, "Students Get University Credit for Love"). You could, of course, anticipate the criticism and teach the course in an exceedingly narrow, rigid "academic" fashion. There's nothing necessarily wrong with that. But perhaps you want to go further. Perhaps you want to offer a bit more of yourself in this course on love. But how much?

One risk is this: the students might not take the course seriously. They might sign up for the course because the topic—love—sounds fun, easy, perhaps even sexy. You decided to teach a serious course but you end up with a group of non-serious students. However, given the current crisis status of the humanities, it may be worth the risk. Perhaps courses on such fundamental life topics as love belong in the University and at the heart of the humanities.

Still, the question remains: *Can the University and its students take a topic like love seriously as a subject of academic investigation?* With regard to the students, there is a short, practical answer to this question: once a classroom of students starts wrestling with what thinkers like Plato and Louise Erdrich, Kierkegaard and Simone Weil, Montaigne and Alice Walker have to say about love, they will not have the time or inclination to wonder about whether love is a serious topic for intellectual inquiry. The very question will simply dissolve as students and professor dive into the material.

But if we stop there, if we just let the issue disappear in the course of the semester, we might fail to ask ourselves, why would we today even question whether love is a serious academic topic? Love, after all, is a classic scholarly topic. It was the kind of topic that philosophers and intellectuals commonly addressed. Why, then, might the subject seem anomalous today in the University setting?

When we think of love, we think of romance and intimacy, which may be deemed too private or too sentimental for intellectual inquiry. Moreover, many think of love as fundamentally mysterious or even religious—and the fact that I am a professor of religious studies teaching a course on love could confirm this view. But mystery and religion are (supposedly) not suitable topics for public inquiry. They are private, and hence they cannot be subject to rational, intellectual inquiry—the kind of inquiry that we do in the University.

These are some reasons our understanding of love might seem to render it an unacceptable topic in the University. But our understanding of the University—which has changed over time—also contributes to the view of love as an odd or even frivolous academic topic. The University today often takes an unspoken pride in standing outside of everyday needs and language (this is something of a caricature, but I am exaggerating actual features). Cultivating "mind skills," and not "life skills," has become the role of the University. The standard defense, then, relies on a pedagogical division of labor: in the University students learn academic skills; outside the University they learn everything else. A personal, practical education is deemed an extra-curricular activity and, like most other "extras," it is seen as something of an optional bonus.

One evident problem with this division of labor is that it imposes an artificial—and ultimately

unworkable—separation of academic skills from the very material or content that these skills were meant to address: our daily lives as individuals, as members of various communities, and as citizens in a democratic society and global community. What if love, for example, has a bearing on what it means to be an engaged citizen? Plato and Simone Weil certainly thought it did. After Athens had been defeated in the long Peloponnesian War, Plato reflected on how Athens could again flourish, and he claimed that love—not the military—was Athens's most valuable public resource. Further, Weil held that neighborly love, and its work of attention, are more important in the labor of the citizen than working to support a rights-based society. In shunning practical topics, the modern University has neglected the concept of love. But why keep practical skills and topics out of a university education? Classically, education addressed the cultivation of the *whole* person and that person's relation to the broader civic society.

I needed a change. I needed a new course, a new way for myself. W. H. Auden once said, "A professor is someone who talks in someone else's sleep." I was becoming that professor. I needed to wake up my students and myself in the process. I needed to think anew about what is vital and required for a course.

Course Requirement

You are expected to participate actively in every aspect of the course. Participation will be an important factor in your life.

In the first few weeks of the semester, we read Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* along with Plato's *Symposium*. My students and I approached both books as addressing what it is to be lost and found, and about how beauty and love, if invited into our lives, can lead us home even if the path is difficult and the homecoming imperfect. I started one of these class sessions with the Tlingit-Haida poem, introducing it with my own story of losing and finding my bearings in Alaska. The poem's title and first line go like this:

> *What Do I Do When I Am Lost In the Forest?*
>
> Stand still.

I read the poem because it illuminated our emerging understanding of Erdrich and Plato, but that's not the only reason. I was glad for this occasion to offer my students a practical gift. I told them there would be a time in their lives—the challenge of a class project, a broken relationship, an illness, a hope dashed, a fear realized—when this poem could help them find their way. The class ended in liturgical response.

Three times I asked, "What do I do when I am lost in the forest?" and three times the students replied in unison, "Stand still."

I was scared to go down this path. Could I really do this? Could I offer my students a practical gift? But then I asked: What is it that is elevated in *higher* education that would keep us from reaching down to what is plain and fundamental and practical? Do we allow the humanities to help students discover their humanity, their gifts and passions, their joys and sense of place, and to offer them ways to navigate our maddeningly complex world?

For fourteen years I brought students to the Green Haven Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison in upstate New York. Such intellectual disciplines as poetry, moral philosophy, and history are not often associated with people behind bars. The common assumption is that the educational interests of the incarcerated population, insofar as there are any, are limited to vocational-technical training. That assumption is false. The incarcerated at Green Haven are starved for the nourishment of heart and mind that comes from humanistic studies. And, of all things, they wanted a course on love. I do not mean to understate their desire for practical and vocational skills. Still, maybe due to the bleakness of their environment, the incarcerated men at Green Haven truly understand that humans cannot flourish on bread and water alone. These men know, in ways tangible and terrible, that you can starve a man while feeding him. And so, even as their basic needs are met, the incarcerated have a hunger for life-enhancing wisdom, knowledge, and beauty. These are practical resources in their lives. It helps them survive and even experience some flourishing.

"There used to be a bar in Denver called 'Mary's Place.'" That is how I start the love course. That is how the journey begins. I introduce the course and myself with stories about my grandmother, Mary—about her life as an immigrant, her struggles, her love, and her generosity. People would come into the bar, strangers, people who often looked down and out, and Mary would feed them at no charge. She did not have much to say to them as her English was poor. But her heart was large, large enough for me, her absentee grandson, and large enough for the stranger, whom she fed and considered her neighbor. Mary slept at "Mary's Place." At the back of the bar was a small room, with some planks in one corner, which was her bed. Also in the room was a small Greek Orthodox icon, with a small red candle in front of it. That was the light of her faith.

Mary was one of the fist moral exemplars in my life. After she died, dozens of tales surfaced about how Mary had given money to various people and organizations in need. I never had the chance to tell Mary that I admired her, or that I loved her. And so I dedicate the course to her. I confess to the students that I suspect that the mystery which Mary posed to me is one reason I am with them now teaching the course:

> *The springs of Mary's actions were often those of her faith—that is, her religious habits, practices, beliefs. This obviously isn't true of all loving actions, and I certainly would not*

want to suggest that religion and love always go together. But I suspect that in Mary's life, and in the lives of others, there is often a connection between love and religious orientation. And that is one of the topics that we will be exploring in this class: the relation between a person's religion (or if not religion, let's say a person's spiritual or moral orientation) and how that person understands the world, acts in the world, loves the world, and is willing to be loved back by it.

That's a big question. It's a difficult question: the relation between a person's identity and the different types of love that that person experiences—love of God, friendship, romance, marriage, love of self and of the natural world. It's a big question, and it's a worthy one.

Readings

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*
Plato, *The Symposium*
Sufi and Christian Mystics (selected passages)
Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*
Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*
Joseph Marshall, *The Lakota Way*
John Stilgoe, *Outside Lies Magic*
Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*
Montaigne, *Essays*
Dante, *La Vita Nuova*
de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*
Oscar Wilde, "The Nightingale and the Rose"
"Love and Reality," *Buddhism And Love*
Terry Tempest Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger*
Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety*
Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Films:
Brother Sun, Sister Moon
Dead Man Walking
Wings of Desire
Fried Green Tomatoes

The Return of Martin Guerre
The Crying Game

The questions about love that I explore with my students lead us down many paths—perhaps too many or at least more than we're accustomed to. The novelists Louise Erdrich and Alice Walker and the philosophers Plato and Simone Weil help us to interrogate the potential conflict between transcendent and immanent love, and the relation between these loves and issues such as institutional racism and classism. The films *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (*The Return of Martin Guerre*), and *The Crying Game* provide rich material on the nature of friendship, marriage, gender, civic love, and the conflict between a variety of public and private loves. We also tried to put into conversation some Native American texts with the movie, *Brother Son, Sister Moon*. Kierkegaard on love in the religious mode is placed in dialogue with the movie, *Dead Man Walking*. The topic of "love of the everyday" and love in the Lakota tradition is investigated with the help of Joseph Marshall and the film, *Wings of Desire*. So, many paths.

But perhaps not every successful course needs to have a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end, with smooth and polished steps leading from one point to another. I enjoy teaching such orderly courses. But I have also come to trust such unkempt courses as the love course. It is less like sustaining an argument and more like exploring a gallery: each week we enter a different room, to see what's there for us to delight in, to learn from, and to critique.

The course is also "unkempt" insofar as it draws from a variety of types of genres—novels, poetry, film, creative non-fiction, and the discursive argument. Such variety helps me to draw out the richness and ambiguity of both the topic of love and my main field of inquiry, namely, that place where religion, philosophy, and ethics meet. I do not see novels and films as easy-to-handle illustrations of the abstract, theoretical material of philosophy. Rather, literature and film provide imaginative routes into my subject matter**.** There is, however, something risky about bringing film and literature into my classroom. I know how to handle and present philosophical arguments, maintaining strict control of the class lesson. But with film and literature, the interpretive horizons seem more expansive, more open to collaborative inquiry, and less likely to lead to a predetermined destination. The rich variety of genres invites the students on an indeterminate journey, into which they have a chance to weave their own stories.

The first full class session begins with a story about a fifteen-year-old named Jimmy, a young man that I met at a youth shelter during the summer I worked in the Kentucky Appalachian Mountains. Jimmy did not have a home. There was the shelter for abused and neglected kids, but that is an institution, not a home. He had a sister in Louisville, but he was not wanted there. And his brother was in jail. Jimmy had no home.

On the day he learned that his brother had been stabbed in jail, Jimmy made a run for it—back on the streets, trying to make his way to his sister's house. He burned with desire: desire for that which might deliver him from his loneliness, and from a profound sense of the absence of love. I searched for Jimmy

and found him (by luck) on the streets of Lexington, as he was trying to make his way. I pleaded with him to return to the shelter with me. He swore at me, spit in my face, and threatened to stab me (though the only weapon he had in his back pocket was a cigarette lighter). After about 10 minutes of my attempting to bring him back to the shelter, the director of the shelter ordered me to let him go: "let the cops pick him up on the streets." "Jimmy, this is it," I said to him, "I'm supposed to let you go. Please, come on back with me, come back home." Jimmy's angry face softened and flashed me a big smile: "See ya later, Mark," and off he went down a dark street. That was the last I ever saw of Jimmy.

Home and love: the two go together. At least that is what Plato thought, as does Louise Erdrich. And so the love course begins, reflecting on the types of homes and love as described by Plato and Erdrich. Jimmy was trying to get home. He was making a run for it, even if in a somewhat rash way. There is something deeply Platonic about this. In the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, two dialogues on love, Socrates tells us that we are not entirely comfortable here on the planet earth, because ultimately it is not our true home. In many ways, we are strangers here, aliens. Love is the desire to get home and the means to take us there. Socrates' teacher—that dynamic, powerful priestess, Diotima—describes how love, like a ladder, leads us up to our true home, which is to dwell with absolute beauty and to possess absolute goodness. The beauties of the earth, we are told, are but the initial rungs of the ladder of ascent.

In this account of love, Jimmy thought he was looking for an earthly home, with a warm bed and family members. What he really wanted, however, what he really desired—though he did not know it—was his true, spiritual home. A home that never changes, that won't ever let him down, that won't ever throw him out. Jimmy's initial search for this true home was fairly predictable. One first seeks a particular embodiment of the eternal beauty. Jimmy, driven by love in search of love and home, must find a particular instance of beauty: a person, perhaps a parent, a sister, or a shelter worker like me. Being with this person, loving this person, will give Jimmy some sense of having found a home. But if he is to ascend the ladder of Platonic spirituality, he must at some point recognize that those whom he loves and finds beautiful are only reflections of true beauty and goodness.

Love and the journey home. Do I tell my students my own stories, my own journeys, toward a home? Pedagogical discretion. What to tell? What to hold back? Later in the course, weeks after the students hear about Jimmy's search for a home, there is a two-week section on marriage. We discuss the relationship between marriage, friendship, and *eros*. We read Aristotle, Dante, de Rougemont, and Wallace Stegner. We watch the films, *The Return of Martin Guerre* and *The Crying Game*. We talk about marriage in all its varieties—"traditional" and nontraditional—and about its many challenges. Do I tell my story to my students? Should I tell them *everything* I know about marriage? Do I pull from my backpack the crumpled piece of paper that for years I carried with me as a reminder, a warning:

> Stopple the orifices of your heart, Close your doors;

> your whole life you will not suffer. Open the gate of your heart...
>
> your whole life you will be beyond salvation.[2]

Do I tell my students why I wrote it down and held it close? Do I tell them that when one begins to suffer, one way out of sorrow is to detach oneself from those relationships that inevitably lead to suffering? Love may build a home but it can also destroy it. Love may bring healing but also brokenness. What to tell? What am I to risk?

It could be argued that Jimmy and June Kashpaw (central characters in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*) are motivated by Platonic *eros*. We all are. This is the chief human stimulus: driving, passionate, mind- and body-altering *eros*. There is nothing cold about Platonic love. It may not be sexual, but it is erotic and passionate and potentially life-transforming. Ultimately, for Diotima and Socrates, love is an intense desire for happiness, and this desire for happiness motivates all human action.

So, how do we actually go about finding happiness, fulfilling this deep longing in us? Pretty much the way Jimmy and June did it—desperately. Diotima understands this. She understands us. We are needy creatures. If we were not needy, we would not have desire: we would not need love. We would be god and would be perfectly self-sufficient. But as humans, we are needy, and we tend to go about trying to satisfy our needs in unsatisfying ways. So Diotima offers Socrates and the rest of us a way that will not let us down, a way that will satisfy our desire perfectly, completely, and eternally. Most of us do not understand this yet, but, ultimately, our true love is the love of wisdom, that is, the way of life known as philosophy. And discovering that way for ourselves is one long, erotic journey: a passionate pursuit of philosophy, of wisdom, and of the good. It is a terribly sexy journey, because beauty is the avenue which excites body and mind as one pursues the good.

It is also an unsettling journey: it threatens to change your life radically. It is likely to lead to madness, at least from the perspective of the conventional, status-quo-seeking world**.** Again, then, love is risky business. It can disrupt and topple our lives. Education shares with love this potential for disruption. This is why love and education often travel together. Learning and love entail the risk of unsettlement. Emerson had something like this in mind when he wrote, "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."[3] If we are genuinely searching and eager to learn, we can't hold out for comfort. When I first started out in my vocation as an educator, my long hours of class preparation were dedicated to discovering and presenting every conceivable question and answer to my students. My aim was to journey in learning so that my students would not have to. I would never be stumped by my students, would never need to say, "Now that's a good question; we'll need to ponder that one and see where it leads us." To open that door would be to leave behind my rock-solid, reassuring lesson plan for the rest of the class period. I was not yet ready for that. I needed to exert control. Such desire for pedagogical control mandates only allowing topics and questions that can be readily handled. What might it mean to let go of such control, to embrace risk, and to allow education to shake us, disrupt us, tear some part of us

down in order that something else—something more just or beautiful or apt—might rise up? Teaching on love pried open my door to pedagogical risk.

The Platonic punch line, then, is this: our highest love is for the eternal possession of the good, and philosophy—the love of wisdom as a way of life—is the erotic journey to it. Now, that punch line doesn't usually sound entirely convincing to many of my students. They find more plausible the ways of love as depicted in *Love Medicine*, where love is rooted not in universal goodness but rather in the particular—a particular face, hand, person, community, or tradition. Love grounded and rooted in the contingent particularities of a life, which is what we turn to next.

Plato tells a grand story of how universal love propels us to our ultimate home. Erdrich, too, tells stories about love and home, but the stories are less grand, the homes are never perfect, and the love is particular and frail. *Love Medicine* begins with June Kashpaw, a Chippewa Native American, packed and waiting in North Dakota for the noon bus that would take her home. Plato offers us a spiritual ladder to reach our home. But June didn't have such a ladder, only a bus. As she leaned her head against a metal toilet roll dispenser, getting ready to go out with a near stranger who she hopes might be able to love her (and he does, but in the wrong way), she felt that "underneath it all her body was pure and naked—only the skins were stiff and old. Even if he was no different, she would get through this again."[4] And she did. After he passed out on top of her in his car, she managed to get out, and she decided to skip the bus and walk home:

> Even when it started to snow she did not lose her sense of direction. . . . The heavy winds couldn't blow her off course . . . Even when her heart clenched and her skin turned crackly cold, it didn't matter, because the pure and naked part of her went on.
>
> The snow fell deeper that Easter than it had in forty years, but June walked over it like water and *came home*.[5]

And so in death June comes home. But this homecoming is not a grand finale. June had made and found a variety of homes, all imperfect in different ways. Her final home in death is one of these. The Platonic quest for our true home is ultimately one that lifts us out of pain, out of life as we know it—material, rough, unpolished. Perhaps traces of such a Platonic or Christian homecoming are found in *Love Medicine*. Mainly, however, *Love Medicine* offers a very different kind of quest for home. It begins in the rough—with June, with "Patient Abuse," with broken pieces—and it never departs far from it. Perhaps this is Erdrich's commentary on what we can hope for, on what we can expect. Yet the novel is not a dreary one, because of the power of love to heal partially and to empower people to feel somewhat at home in this world, even though life wears them down as if they were pebbles made smooth by a river. So while Platonic love takes us to a home largely out of the world as we know it, *Love Medicine* makes our earthly, broken homes a little more whole and complete. Erdrich's love makes everything a little smoother, like a veneer of wax on

a rough floor.

But this contrast between Plato and Erdrich is not entirely straightforward, and the students sense it. It's only about week three into the course, but by now my students have gathered that in this class we will not be satisfied with easy binaries. We are all willing to wrestle with difficult and untidy topics in order to "get things right," even if that wrestling leads to messy and unkempt perspectives and conclusions. There are genuine difficulties and ambiguities inherently rooted in reality. To meet these with too much tidiness or too little patience can lead to the error of simplification. The students note that there is something of an earth-bound orientation in Plato's love, and something of a transcendent love in *Love Medicine*. They challenge the framework that I have thus far offered them.

And so, together, we explore the earthly and particular in the *Symposium* and the transcendent and universal in *Love Medicine*. For example, in the *Symposium*, there are passages that suggest that even if this world isn't our *ultimate* home, it is nevertheless a temporary home that we should care deeply about. In *Love Medicine*, we explore what could be called transcendent love: forms of love that somehow transform desperate situations as if the love came from the outside. As if, given the particular details of a situation, only something from the outside could save it. We talk about Marie's stigmata (the right wound, at the right time); Gerry's amazing, miraculous escapes (his disappearing and reappearing at the right time); Lipsha's gracious touch (which comes and goes like grace itself); and the moment of Lyman's transformative revelation as he gazes at the wounded hand of Marie. Still, even the miraculous moments of *Love Medicine* are thoroughly grounded in the ordinary, in the immanent, in the deeply human. After all, the stigmata comes from a long, sharp fork, and Lyman's revelation comes from a misplaced hand in an industrial machine. Yet that, perhaps, is the miracle of it all: that in the mundane, in the everyday, we can experience a healing love medicine, and that may sometimes be enough to make the everyday bearable, sometimes even wondrous.

Having established and then questioned two polarized, ideal types of love—transcendent and immanent—my students and I are ready to explore a wide range of types of love. We don't outright reject the polarity but are now more dexterous with it. We initially draw the stark contrast in order to discern subtle, intermingling of types of love.

We're now about four weeks into the course and we have many journeys ahead. We first turn to the *Song of Songs*—a biblical text that is earthy and sexual as well as transcendent and holy. If ever a text intermingled transcendent and immanent love, it's the *Song of Songs*. It sings of the love of God and the bodily, emotional love between human lovers. The *Song of Songs* is the "holy of holies" (as Rabbi Akiva claimed) not in spite of the sexuality in the text but because of it. In this moment my students and I know that the polarity, secular versus sacred, is simply not adequate. We continue to question the adequacy of the secular versus sacred framework by screening the film on the life of St. Francis, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon,* and reading some select passages on Native American "spirituality" as well as Sufi and Christian mysticism. The theme of earthly and divine love intermingled continues with Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* and then Simone Weil's *Waiting For God*. My students eagerly delve into Kierkegaard and Weil, exploring how, in

different ways, both authors recognize and mediate the dichotomy between human and divine love.

We are now ready to turn to love in Lakota traditions. Does "Lakota love," like the *Song of Songs*, question the very distinction between human and divine love, between the immanent and the transcendent? We attempt to address this question with cultural sensitivity and nuance. We discover, for example, that the concept of "balance" in Lakota traditions is something that is bigger than the individual or the group: it is that which governs the universe. But it is not located outside the universe. It is found, potentially, in every cell, rock, creature, ecosystem, and relationship—including love relationships and acts of compassion. Balance is not at the top of a love ladder, outside time and space; it is, rather, fully present in the most ordinary events of our most ordinary lives.

Love *in and of the ordinary* is the next topic and destination in our shared journey. The students in earlier versions of the course forced me to introduce this section. They would not have it any other way. And so we now explore *love in the everyday* with the help of two "texts"—the film, *Wings of Desire*, and John Stilgoe's *Outside Lies Magic*. Both teach us how to truly see—to *witness*—the familiar world about us. Both seem to say: *to see well is to care, to love*. And both suggest that to be human is to descend—to plunge into and relish everyday grittiness (that vacant lot behind the strip mall, that ride on the subway). To be human is to join Damiel, that angel in *Wings of Desire*, who chooses to depart from the frictionless, eternal realm and to dive into quotidian time and space—yes, the realm of disease, pain, and death, but also of everyday joy, pleasure, and love. To be human is to *be a part of things*: to drink warm coffee on a cold day, to feed a cat, to smile at a stranger, and to hold a loved one. And if we could learn to be truly present in the everyday—and not just walk mindlessly through it—perhaps we could be touched by and aptly respond to the doubts, vulnerabilities, and fears of those around us.

Vulnerability provides the path for my students and me to explore friendship. We ask: If friendships are necessary for human flourishing, is that in part due to human vulnerability, to human weakness? Aristotle, Montaigne, and the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* all depict how the world can attempt to strip people of their humanity. All three insist that cruel institutions and tragic events make friendships all the more necessary. Friendships can be places to retreat to when our public lives and worlds become unbearable; when we're most tempted to hate the world and everything in it, friends can remind us of something good, even if at times it seems that the friendship is the only thing in the world that is good and safe like a home.

Of course, my students do not fail to note that while friendships may help us in light of our vulnerability to suffering, they are also a source of suffering—for example, as when one shares the pain of a friend who is dying or who is being unjustly persecuted by the state. Yet, again, it is this very vulnerability that seems to make friendships, as Ninny said at the end of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the most important thing in life. They are important because we are not self-sufficient and because of our vulnerability to the vicissitudes of life—suffering from an indifferent or cruel world, or simply from the limits of the body.

And what of romance and *eros*? How do these fit with notions of transcendent and immanent love, human vulnerability, and the journey home? My students insist that Dante finds both his home and his

chief vulnerability in his erotic depiction of Beatrice as both transcendent and immanent, as both divine and human, or as a bridge between the two. In the end, he refuses to pose divine and human love as alternatives, for he suggests that in true love heaven and earth come together. The highest love, the love of God, is a passionate, erotic love that can ultimately only be satisfied by God. But in order to experience that love, humans need mediators, and hence Dante's need for Beatrice: an icon of perfection, beauty incarnate. Every human life has its own context, its own circumstances, and in those circumstances, any person can potentially be, or find, a mediator between the divine and the human.

My students and I are now ready to consider a new development that emerges out of the twelfth century: a celebration of love between humans, not as a way up the ladder to the Absolute Good or to God, but as a worthy and lovely goal in and of itself. We have now reached the modern notion of romantic love as being intrinsically lovely as well as intrinsically risky and dangerous. To help us gain perspective on what feels like a quite familiar notion of love, we read Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*. By way of this dreary account of romantic Western love, we are given a chance to address head-on de Rougemont's stark claim: "happy love has no history."[6] The stories that we "westerners" tell about love are full of obstacles, suffering, and death (think of Tristan and Iseult or Romeo and Juliet). True love means passion—that is, suffering. Put differently: If your romantic relationship is going smoothly, then it is not really true love and you should make some changes—perhaps introduce some obstacles or move on to a more passionate romantic opportunity. My students argue back and forth the merits of de Rougemont's claim that the Western paradigm of true love will always make enduring, loving relationships seem like they are lacking true love. At this point, I mainly stand back, watch, and listen.

Rather than attempt to bring the debate on de Rougemont to a neat conclusion, we augment the debate by turning to some Buddhist critiques of Western romantic love: we desire *desire*; we desire to be attached; and this attachment causes us suffering, distorts our vision of reality, and hinders our ability to be compassionate. What is the cure? Cease desiring. In many ways, it is hard to argue with that. But Terry Tempest Williams offers us a different view on attachments, or at least on *some* attachments and forms of *eros*. For example, Williams encourages us (seduces us, really) to be attached to the health of the land and to be enflamed with the erotics of place, that is, to love a place dearly and thereby risk having our hearts broken when that place is subjected to avaricious extraction and poisonous pollution. For Williams, we must be open to attachment, desire, and *eros* in spite of the suffering that they bring. While she acknowledges the risks that come with attachments, she suggests that it may be more risky—more painful—to cut yourself off from attachments and become like the living dead. Williams is clear on this: love and vulnerability are inseparable.

After vigorously debating the strengths in both positions, we decide that we do not need to choose between William's way of attachment and "Buddhism's" way of non-attachment. Although these ways are seemingly incompatible, both provide avenues to worthy forms of compassion and care.

My students and I are now in the home stretch. Our final topics are marriage and love at the crossroads

(forms of love that just do not fit the established categories). The film, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, assists us as we explore such questions as: What is the relation between marriage, love, and home? Can a loveless marriage yield a home? What might count as a good marriage? What features must come together to make a marriage good?—enduring love, happiness, commitment, fulfillment, sexual pleasure, the transfer of social capital, permanence, children, romance, financial stability? How did these different features become associated with the institution, marriage? If a marriage is supposed to bring together enduring love, sex, friendship, romance, fruitfulness, and permanence, one might wonder: Is a good marriage possible? Among other things, *The Return of Martin Guerre* casts light on the historical development of marriage and depicts the tension between the legal, obligatory aspects of marriage and the romantic, friendship aspects. To the film, my students and I bring our own prodigious personal experience with the problems and promises of marriage and divorce. How much do we share? What boundaries am I to establish? What risks, here, am I willing to take?

It is no coincidence that the Romantics in the nineteenth century, inheritors of courtly love, often stressed women's emancipation. If loving, intimate relationships required choice, reciprocity, and genuine friendship, then women required political rights, social equality, and opportunities for intellectual development. And when marriage, as in the age of *Martin Guerre*, was not seen as a loving union, when marriage was an institution in which women were subordinated to their husbands, we can understand why a loving relationship *outside* marriage was appealing. Yet what happens when the nature of marriage changes? What happens when marriage is no longer strictly a matter of property arrangements or legitimate heirs, but a matter of companionship, respect and, yes, romance? What then? This becomes our central question. Can a life-long relationship include passion, choice, and friendship? Is it possible to have all these voluntarily aspects of love in marriage, that is, in a permanent union? A similar question is: "How do you write a book on something as daily and steady as marriage?" That was Wallace Stegner's challenge in his novel, *Crossing to Safety*: how to make marriage an interesting topic. *This could be our own challenge someday.* How can we make our marriages, or our long-term relationships, interesting, dynamic, and lively?

In the film, *The Crying Game*, we see love in unexpected places. We also see types of marriage, romance, and friendship that are unconventional in the eyes of some. Of course, what is deemed conventional is *often a matter of details*. At one point in the film, Jimmy exclaims to Dil, a transgender woman: "*But, you're not a girl.*" Dil tersely replies: "*details.*" As we discuss the movie, we ask ourselves—*What details matter? What details don't matter?—and to whom and why?* The details of race, religion, gender, and sexuality mix and separate in candid conversations about various forms of loving, romantic relationships, and the various cruel obstacles these relationships encounter.

As you may recall, the course began with my grandmother, Mary. Hers was, in many ways, a story of moving from mere survival to human flourishing. She eventually found and made a home. We started with Mary and we lingered with her perhaps longer than any of us realized. June Kashpaw was a Mary: she was

a survivor courageously searching for a home. And Celie—the main character in our final reading for the course, *The Color Purple*—is a Mary, too.

The novel begins with the rape of Celie when she is a young girl, at which point her home suddenly becomes a mere house—a place where someone merely lives, merely survives. The novel ends with the same house, the same structure, but it is now transformed into a home: it is the Fourth of July, the white people's celebration of independence, but also a chance for black folks to be spared some work. And so the book ends with a party, a full-blown family reunion, with Celie, Nettie, and Shug; Albert, Samuel, and Harpo; and Sofia, Jack and Odessa. They are all together, they are old, and they are happy. Celie's house has truly become a home, insofar as a black woman can have a home in a white nationalist, sexist, and racist society. This is nothing short of a victory—a testimony to courage, tenacity, grace, and love in the midst of oppression, cruelty, suffering, and despair.

Celie's journey home is a long one, and it weaves together many different types of loving relationships. My students and I consider these various relationships, in the context of both a grim house and a loving home, and we spend time in those gray places in between the two. We try to name the relationships, the loving ones and the hateful ones, those that give life and those that destroy. There is power in naming. Alice Walker is one among many African-American women naming the experience of the triple suffering that results from being poor, black, and female. Celie's letters name that world of suffering, a world in which black women suffer from white men, black men, and white women. But the letters also name the various forms of love that appear in that same world, often unexpectedly. And so my students and I take on our most difficult task yet: we attempt to name the loving and hateful relationships found in the novel and in a world of relentless racism, gender discrimination, and homophobia. Sisterly love, marital love, friendship, romance, parental love, love of heritage, love of self, love of the nature world, and love of God—our survey of love does not conclude but rather expands. The various loves—transcendent and immanent, secular and scared—intricately and powerfully intertwine and intermingle in *The Color Purple*.

At the end of this course, I can't help but ask: Where did this journey take us? A standard question about a course is, "What knowledge or skills did this course help the students develop?" I suppose one answer is that during the course of the semester we learned how to identify different accounts of loves in Plato and Erdrich, Kierkegaard and Simone Weil, Dante and Alice Walker, *The Return of Martin Guerre* and *The Crying Game*, among other authors and films. That's one way to measure the length and success of the journey.

Yet there's still another way to describe the journey and its outcome. We can think about the lessons learned, not as if we were listing the "Ten Steps" that belong to a "how-to" manual, *Love for Dummies*, but rather life lessons—depictions of a range of life's possibilities—that could prove helpful at different times in different ways: love (in all its forms) often requires courage and the ability to risk pain and disappointment; love is sometimes as much an emotion as it is an activity; love often demands patience and tremendous attentiveness; love can raise our eyes to heaven above and keep our feet firmly rooted in the earth; love can

be destructive and love can heal; there are imposers of love as well as loving imposters; love can't always be neatly categorized, and it appears in sunny places as well as among dark ruins; it often grows slowly but sometimes appears suddenly, unexpectedly; and we mustn't neglect love's opportunities—as when we overlook the color purple. This, too, is another way to describe the course: an inventory of practical lessons learned. We come to see love, in its diverse forms, as a powerful force in our continual, fraught journey to feel at home, as vulnerable creatures, in a world full of beauty and wonder and cruelty and indifference.

There is still another way to describe the course. Albert, that "lowdown dog" in *The Color Purple*, grows in maturity toward the end of the novel. As he works on a shirt, he says to Celie:

> I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women . . . I didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing. And that if you ast yourself why you black or a man or a woman or a bush it don't mean nothing if you don't ast why you here, period.
>
> So what you think? I [Celie] ask.
>
> I think us here to wonder. To wonder. To ast. And that in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, the more I love.[7]

Perhaps that's what the course achieved: it allowed my students and I to wonder. It helped us to ask about the big things and to learn about some little things on the way. And perhaps the more we wondered, the more we loved.

Good teachers often call themselves lifelong learners, and they encourage their students to think of themselves as lifers in this sense. But maybe there is some good in thinking of instructors and students as lifelong educators. For we are all teachers. We all know some things. The classroom is a more vital place when all are asked to contribute what they know. We are all teachers, then, and we are also all artists—struggling practitioners of the art of living. All individuals have their genius—their particular voice, perspective, distinctive understanding of human flourishing—to offer to the course, to the community, to the common good, to the collective endeavor of our becoming human. My students are bright, yet their flames are often hidden. Too often I implicitly ask them to put their light under a bushel so that I can be the only light in the room and they can then soak up my rays without disturbance. This keeps the classroom monochromatic with its attendant order. But after teaching the course on love, I now want more light, diverse rays, less order.

It turns out, our life journeys in and out of the classroom are most promising when they admit risk and when their paths are not clearly marked. This is a lesson about education but also about the ways of love. We educators are indeed in a risky business, and at its best a loving one. For when we offer ourselves to our students, and allow them to offer themselves—their light—to the shared work of finding a way forward, we are helping each other in that ongoing, ever-changing, dynamic task of leaning into the world and making a home—however precarious—in it. This is when vocation and avocation come together, when, as Robert Frost put it, "love and need are one /And the work is play for mortal stakes." And then we once again remember who we are and why we as educators do what we do.[8]

Notes

1 Robert Frost, "Two Tramps in Mud Time," *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1975), 277.

2 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Victor Mair (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 21.

3 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Emerson: Essays and Poems*, eds. Harold Bloom, Paul Kane, and Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 413.

4 Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 4.

5 Erdrich, *Love Medicine*, 7; emphasis added.

6 Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 15.

7 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), 247.

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