

Chapter 34: Love

I had no luck in love. Girl called me up, she said come on over, no one's home. So I went over, no one was home.

Rodney Dangerfield¹

The reader will have noticed that, while recounting my life story in these pages, I have said almost nothing about the women in my life. Whenever I mention a woman with whom I had a romantic or sexual relationship, I don't go into details, but perhaps refer the reader to this chapter. Dear reader, I regret to disappoint you, but I'm not going to go into those matters here either – they are mostly too painful to relate. I have been as open as I could be about the rest of my life, but I am under no obligation to do that here. If I had signed a million-dollar contract for a tell-all memoir, then I might have a duty to tell all no matter what. But I didn't, and so I don't, and so I won't. Without going into the specifics of any particular relationship, however, or identifying anyone, I will say something general about the subject.

Nobody gets everything right, or fulfills every potential. For example, I have done pretty well with the life of the mind, but not so well with the life of the body. I am good at analysis but not so good at emotions. I write pretty well but cannot draw beyond the cartoon stage or play a musical instrument. I have made good progress in religion and self-knowledge but not in service. I found work I could do that made me a good living with relatively modest effort, but it was not work that meant anything to me or was much good to anyone else. I have many close friends but no children. And so on. Some people get some things right, and other people get other things right; some do well where I haven't and sometimes I do well where they haven't. Someone may not be very good at logical analysis, and this may have cost him heavily in misunderstanding and poor choices, but he takes satisfaction in his children and grandchildren and makes his success with them instead. There is nothing wrong with this. People have different talents and no one does everything well.

One of the things I never learned to do well is maintain a satisfactory pair-bond (I deliberately use an ethological term here). That is not to say I don't have many women friends whom I love very much – but that is not at all the same thing. Although I have had a fair number of love/sex relationships with women, from my late teens to my mid-50s, none of them lasted very long or turned out well. When one relationship goes bad, maybe it's the other person. When another goes nowhere, maybe it's the stars. But when

¹ Rodney Dangerfield (1921-2004) was a comedian whose routine was based on the premise that he “didn't get no respect.”

they *all* go bad or never even really get going, the fault is probably with oneself. It took me many years of trying and failing in order to realize and accept this, but finally I did.

- I wrote to a friend in 2001, when I was 57, 35 years after the event: *But the thing with K. didn't last – I very much wanted it to but it was yet another relationship I was far too young and bewildered to understand or even begin to know how to handle. I long regretted that. My inner psychiatrist points out that these two tendencies (bewilderment first, and then regret) remained dominant emotions in my love relationships into my 50s.*

When I located the source of the problem, in myself, for a while I kept trying to fix it and get this part of my life to work out right. I renewed my efforts. I changed my attitudes, or so I thought. I tried new approaches. But it never did work out. At last I accepted this too, and stopped trying. I have felt *much* better since I made that decision in the mid-1990s.

For most people it takes a lot of effort find and maintain a satisfactory pair-bond. Some people are naturally talented in this way, or are lucky in their partners, and do well with this either once (or twice) and for all, or serially. I was never very good at either starting or maintaining love affairs, and for decades I felt frustration, and disappointment, and loneliness (even envy) when I was not in a relationship, and often the same emotions, plus anger and anguish, when I was.

Why was this? I don't intend to go into each relationship and analyze why it failed – and for someone with no talent for it there was a surprisingly large number of these relationships. Similarly I don't intend to analyze why I failed time and again to get it right. Perhaps I was imperfectly socialized – attending an all-boys school during adolescence was a terrible idea, and so was isolation during critical years of social development (see Chapter 8). I was often out of step with my female contemporaries as to what was expected or permitted. Perhaps I was damaged by an insanely domineering mother (see Chapter 7) – the failure of all my siblings to develop stable pair-bonds lends weight to this theory. Closely related is the view of a lady who auditioned me for the role of husband and *paterfamilias* and decided I was not up to it because my home hadn't provided a model I could identify with or aspire to. There may be a lot to that.

- Probably most people severely affected in childhood don't get over it – we are pretty much formed by age five, the psychologists tell us and so did Lenin – or in any event their responses once distorted remain distorted. I responded by an exaggerated protectiveness of autonomy – I wouldn't let my professors restrict my autonomy by telling me what to read, I wouldn't let my girlfriends impair my autonomy by snuggling into my life on a permanent basis, and now I have more autonomy than is good for me.

Or (and/or?) perhaps the problem – if it *is* a problem – was not environmental but intrinsic – perhaps I am just not cut out for it. Not everyone is suited to every role in society. There used to be a term *not the marrying kind*, and another *confirmed bachelor*. These were sometimes euphemisms for *homosexual*, which I'm not, but they can also mean *unsuited for pair-bonding*. Homosexuals have stopped seeing their bent as a problem, and maybe mine isn't one either. As the saying goes, a problem is only a problem when it's a problem.

I now realize that what people are supposed to do is look for a partner in life. This seems pretty simple, but I was nearly 60 before I understood it, and the concept is still quite startling to me. Even if I had known about this back in my 20s, I have no idea how I would have gone about doing it, or how such a dynamic works when it works.

When I was still in my 20s I began to consider dropping out of the quest for a pair-bond. Later I used the metaphor of a factory manager sitting in his automated control room, checking the dials. The dials for the love division of my factory showed a severe energy deficit. I was putting a lot of time and energy into the love division, and what was it producing? Not much, and usually a negative return. Often nothing came of a courtship at all. When something did, there were good times at the start when limerence was in the air.² But bad times *inevitably* followed the good ones, and they were very bad, almost always involving long anguished discussions, weeping by the woman involved, and helpless misery for me. The bad times outweighed and outnumbered the good ones, and adding in the fruitless courtships and unrequited passions put the whole enterprise firmly in the red. Was it all worth it? Less and less did I think it was. If it were a real factory, I would shut down a division which year after year cost more to operate than it yielded. This is a deliberately materialistic, mechanical analysis, but it seemed to me (and still does seem) a useful counterweight to the romantic view that the pursuit of love is worth whatever sacrifice may be required.

- “Sex interest in all strong men usually endures unto the end, governed sometimes by a stoic resignation. The experiment of such attraction can, as they well know, be made over and over, but to what end? For many it becomes too troublesome.” Theodore Dreiser, *The Titan* (1914).

Another perspective, yielding a similar conclusion, was a biological one. I was helped to this view by my researches into nature during my LSD period (see Chapter 18.C). What was this kind of love really, and what was it for? It was in the last analysis DNA's way

² *Limerence*, a concept developed by the psychologist Dorothy Tennov to describe the exhilarating initial experience of love, is too complex a concept to define here – see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limerence>.

of making more DNA. Sexual attraction was an inducement to mate. Love was an inducement to mate and form a breeding pair capable of a bond stable enough to maintain human young through their long dependency. Other species, with quicker-developing young, did not need such a stable bond, and for them pheromones were a sufficient inducement to mate. True, some species mated for life – but nature was hugely varied.

On this view, when a man is attracted to the flashing eyes, or lithe body, or perky breasts, or even the pleasing personality of a woman, whatever he might think is going on, it is really a largely mental process constructed by DNA, natural selection and psychological conditioning. What was happening beneath the surface, where due to LSD I could now see, was a biological process not all that different from courtship behavior and response in any other species. Our species are brain specialists, and so our courtship patterns are centered in our brains. But the moral and transcendent elements the romantic tendency had attributed to this process were really part of the veil which covered it. In Hindu terms, this was *Maya*, an illusion entangling our awareness of reality and hiding its true nature. *Maya* is Sanskrit for *not this*. Once seen through, it loses its compelling force. A given lady and I were not really soulmates destined to merge our spirits – it was just DNA trying to get us to reproduce.³ As I did not want to reproduce, I would be better off out of it.⁴

Buddhism and Vedanta and other eastern philosophies also led me to the same place. Why cultivate attachment, when the point of practice is to overcome desire and transcend attachment? Why deliberately create more karma, when the object is to clear it all up so there is no karma left? For those called to marry and be householder yogis, perhaps it made sense. But I wasn't really called to that life. I was really called more to a solitary life as a scholarly hermit (or so I thought, and so it has in good measure turned out to be). The example of the monks, Buddhist and Christian, who opted completely out of the whole courting-and-pairing thing and spent their energy on other pursuits, became increasingly attractive to me.

From an e-mail of 2005:

Desire but not want – that's it exactly! We can recognize passing girls as beautiful and desirable without involving ourselves in their karma or trying to possess them.

³ “And then, whoops, oh Lord, I was the father of twins, because she had kisses sweeter than wine.” From “Kisses Sweeter Than Wine” (1950), lyric by Paul Campbell (actually Pete Seeger and Lee Hays).

⁴ Very neat. On the other hand, as Ezio Pinza sang so affectingly in *South Pacific*, “Who can explain it? Who can tell you why? Fools give you reasons, wise men never try.” From “Some Enchanted Evening” (1949), lyric by Oscar Hammerstein II.

Much better that way. No need to stop the ol' member from rising, as long as we keep our trousers on and do not let the member capture our minds. Good Buddhist! Observer is just the right position to take. Anything else: *Maya!* A friend of mine, a contemporary of ours, thought he was receiving come-on signals from a workplace acquaintance about a generation younger. He immediately lurched into lust mode, plotting how to upend his life and take huge risks just because his receptors were blinking. I said: can't you recognize her? That's Maya, the Deceiver, casting confusion in your path. Don't fall for it! One of the most important things I learned in all my acid voyaging was to recognize impulses based in physiological instinct, like lust, or in terrestrial concerns, like competition and dominance, and see them as part of the programming. Once you see them they can't ensnare you – the yogis used the example of a snake. You can be scared by what you think is a snake until you recognize it as a rope. Once you recognize it, it can't scare you any more.

It was a gradual process, but finally I did retire from the quest. I tried to do it quite a few times. For example, in 1982 I wrote to Christopher:

This is the end of pair-bond searching; I hereby register as a confirmed bachelor, and if that is the result of Motherstuff then so be it as long as I am contented (similar to gay business I guess).

But later in that letter I hedged and said I wasn't ruling anything out. I fell off the wagon several more times, but finally figured out that I had to swear off for good and mean it in order to stay out of trouble. From an e-mail of 2001:

And as far as your suggestion *might even love again* – gosh, I hope not. There is no way I want to go through that again, delicious though it always is at the start. I have found it such a potent source of distraction and sorrow, both for me and for my companion of the time, that even to contemplate diving back into it – in search of what exactly? – seems a kind of madness. I feel like a man recovered from fever – like the old song by Peggy Lee. *Fever! when I touch you. Fever when I hold you tight. Fever! in the morning. Fever all through the night. You give me fever ...* No thanks! The patient has passed the crisis now, and is sitting up in bed, taking a little tea and toast. Do not disturb.⁵

It has been many years since I was active in this area of life, and I don't expect ever to return to it. It is sort of like tobacco, in a way (see Chapter 17.B) – having given it up, I'd better not try it again even once or I'll be right back where I was. I am satisfied with

⁵ Peggy Lee (1920-2002) was one of the most creative and influential jazz song stylists ever. She was also an accomplished songwriter. "Fever" was written by Eddie Cooley and John Davenport (really Otis Blackwell) and published in 1956; Peggy Lee's cover version was recorded in 1958.

this resolution of the problem – it doesn't offer *everything* in life, but then neither does a pair-bond. Although I have a great capacity for love, I was never any good at applying it to pair-bonding. I am well out of it. Maybe next time around I'll do better.

- From an e-mail in 2001: I didn't ask her out because I have been down that path too many times. Pleasant at first, ooh ooh don't stop, and then before you know it endless discussions about the relationship and finally tears on the pillow. I'm not going to be tempted to start all that up again, because I have enough confidence to act on it that my ancient and persistent pattern will not be varied, or at least that the chances of variance are so low as not to be worth the risk. How's that for a complicated sentence? Hawthorne, thou shouldst be living at this hour.

So why not tell the story of every messed-up relationship? As I said, it is too painful. I regret very deeply the failure of many of these relationships, and my conduct toward some of the women I have been involved with makes me cringe to recall. I was never cruel, but I was often ignorant and thoughtless and self-centered and unfeeling and tone-deaf. Buddhism has helped me deal with regret – it is a form of attachment – but remembering the opportunities I squandered, the heedlessness with which I wasted the love offered to me, and the blindness and stupidity and recklessness of my actions, still causes me acute pain. I am working on the pain, trying to get these psychic sores to heal, and doing pretty well with that by now, in my mid-60s. I don't think it would help this effort much to paw over every incident in this squalid history just to make my memoir more complete. Let a curtain stay drawn over most of this. Even as a memoirist, I just don't want to talk about it.

My friend with whom I was discussing my relationship with K. (mentioned above) wrote that back in our college days K. would not have been ready for a successful relationship either, so I should give myself a break. I replied:

I like this revisionist approach. I imagine that I have a storage room like a morgue, with my 3-D holographic mental images of old girlfriends stacked up on racks rising along the walls all the way to the ceiling. I emphasize that these are *not* dead girlfriends, but my own frozen *images* from long ago. One by one I melt these old dead images and they vanish. When I melt the last frozen image I am free. But there are quite a lot of them and they are piled uncomfortably high. Even today, after all I have learned from Buddhism about clinging to past desires, these memories can still cause me sudden and actually audible gasps of pain. I know these pains are just fossils of old conditioning and old desires, but they still hurt. I have done pretty well in transcending some of that stuff, all things considered, but I still have a long, long way to go. As the *Dhammapada* says:

Like water on the leaf of a lotus flower
Or a mustard seed on the point of a needle,
[The master] does not cling.
For he has reached the end of sorrow
And has laid down his burden.

For the record: I don't put down women or put any of this onto them. I love women, enjoy their company, and their bodies totally thrill me. Nor am I saying sex and love are somehow no good, or not worth the effort. Both love and sex are terrific. If I were constitutionally suited to developing and maintaining a pair-bond, no doubt I would feel differently about all I have been discussing, and would be disinclined to leave my toasty conjugality for a monkish life. But as I don't seem to have either that talent or that constitution – if I had I would have been married (and probably divorced) at least once by now – it makes no sense to keep trying, and keep failing, with all the attendant emotional cost and anguish for both parties. I'm not putting down pole vaulting either, but I'm not suited for it, am most unlikely to succeed at it, and it would make no sense for me to suit up and try out for the team. That's all I'm saying. Really, it is. Really.⁶

- “But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I.” 1 Corinthians 7-8.

It might have been different if I had ever wanted children. Then I might have gone ahead anyway and formed a bond and had them, and perhaps it would all have worked out for the best. Most people I know who have had children (and by my age most people have) speak of them as the best part of their lives. Whatever – I was never interested in this, and indeed have always thought that children must be an awful burden, with all the mess and duty and expense and emotional travail. When I see a family group trooping along I think: thank God I never got trapped into that!

My tongue was only halfway into my cheek when I wrote these e-mails to a baby-loving friend.

- Children at that age are transparent – you can see it all happening. I find this very interesting, but in the same way I find a museum exhibit interesting – fun to watch for a while, say 10 minutes, and then on to something else. The thing about children, though, is that when you get bored, they're still there. It's hard for

⁶ “With autobiography there's always another text, a countertext, if you will, to the one presented. It's probably the most manipulative of all literary forms.” Philips Roth, *The Facts* (1988).

me to understand how they could stay interesting for the length of time they have to be attended to.

- The whole baby thing, especially the wanting-a-baby thing, is still a mystery to me. Why exactly does a person want a baby, given its relentless demands, filthy habits, and enormous cost? I have puzzled over this for decades and am no closer to the answer. That is probably why I flunked out of the gene pool. I still prefer reference books, so much superior to babies in so many ways – clean, undemanding, useful, reliable, full of valuable information, easy to understand, always waiting only to help, requiring no attention, and free after a very modest initial cost. None of these things can be said of babies.
- I have no doubt that your grandson is terrific, for a baby, and I hope you accept that heraldry is terrific, for a recondite antiquarian study. I will even go so far as to say I understand why some people prefer babies to heraldry, although it is an eccentric choice as they are not nearly as useful or well documented.

I realize that most of the world takes *exactly* the opposite view, and think that this very experience is the most worthwhile in all of life. I know all the parents who are reading this think: poor fool, he just doesn't get it. But that's my point – I *don't* get it. When people say they want (or wanted) children, I have the discourteous habit of asking them what they want(ed) them *for*. No one has yet given me an answer that makes any sense to me whatever. With this attitude it is probably a good thing I never married, and *definitely* a good thing I never had any children. Maybe I would magically change my mind when my first child was handed squalling to me in the hospital, but I doubt it, and what a calamity for all concerned if I didn't.

A word on homosexuality. The current ideology, started perhaps by Kinsey, holds that everyone is a mixture – all homos are part hetero and all heteros are part homo.⁷ I don't agree with this. While it's totally fine for those who like it, I can't find any homosexual inclination in myself at all. Men and their bodies do not attract or excite me in the least degree. I cannot imagine why men want to have sex with other men – indeed I can scarcely imagine why *women* want to have sex with men. (My brother Adam sometimes says he's a Lesbian trapped in a man's body.) Once when I was about 13 I touched

⁷ Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) was a biologist and zoologist who applied scientific survey techniques to human sexuality, at the time a radical and daring concept. His books *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), known as the Kinsey Reports, created a sensation and changed popular views of what was "normal." They revealed, among many other things, that people in general, and especially notably young women, had a lot more sex in a lot more varieties than was known or suspected or consistent with prevailing ideology, and this was true in particular of homosexuality.

another boy's (clothed) penis, and that was a novelty for a few minutes, but I was never moved to try it again. In 1976, when I was visiting Christopher's house in Taipei (see Chapter 22.C), one of his roommates came into the bathroom where I was taking a shower and propositioned me. I said no, of course, but he kept begging for a kiss, so I thought why not try this, lots of people like it, and I kissed him, tongue and all. It took only a second or two for me to decide *no, yuk, eww, bleeah*, lots of people may like it but I sure don't, and I told him no again, very firmly. And that is the complete lifetime story of my homosexual career.

Tailpiece: *Cupid and Psyche*,
by Francois Gérard (1796)

