

Love

To love has many meanings, ranging from the erotic to the spiritual. In its erotic dimension, to love means to be drawn to the body of another person. In its spiritual dimension, love means to wish to be at one with the spirit of another person. Physical love is compelling. It pre empts all planning, and leads inevitably to consequences—except in its form of flirtation. Those consequences easily outstrip, in significance, the motives initially involved in the erotic compact. You take the girl out to the levee, on an impulse, and the next morning you're a married man! Spiritual love, by contrast, ranges from the passionate to the abstract (amor intellectualis Dei), and leads to a wide variety of outcomes; from astounding increments of knowledge and understanding—as in a master student relationship, to the pure discoveries of the higher geometry or the skywriting of thermodynamics.

Examples

1

I loved my dog Biscuits as I have rarely loved anything. My wife and I talked about Biscuits when we were not with her, and when we were with her she ate from our plates. This was love powerful enough to ground self-sacrifice. My wife returned from Ivory Coast to Iowa to be with Biscuits during what turned out to be her final days. Her vulnerability to pain and mistreatment—we think she was beaten—her unfailing readiness to support us, her patience in pain: what mediaeval saint endured more with higher good spirit? Was it a spiritual love we felt for Biscuits? It was like the love of God in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas: all enduring, indifferent to self-interest, marveling at the glory of the other.

2

I love my parents. This is a love I used to question. It seems to me I had a very tepid relation with my parents. We didn't hug, we didn't shout, we didn't set up value systems or monitor attitudes. What we did was live quiet middle class lives, friendly with neighbors and careful with bills, sociable but restrained, and provide for each of the three of us—I had no siblings—room and tools (books, primarily) to become as fully human as possible, in our own ways. I rarely if ever told my parents I loved them, because that not telling was part of what we did not have to do in the communitarian lifestyle we formed.