

Dreading Valentine's Day?

"If you give your life as a wholehearted response to love, then love will wholeheartedly respond to you." ~ Marianne Williamson

The tradition of Valentine's Day with its Hallmark fueled frenzy has taken on a life of its own. Studies show that many people, especially men hate Valentine's Day. This is particularly true of men who feel like they can't get a handle on what is expected of them during this time. Traditions that play out mechanically add stress, guilt and depression to relationships trying to find balance. This can sometimes make us feel isolated from the masses. Let's be honest. Admitting that you hate Valentine's Day is like saying you hate puppies and warm fuzzy kittens.

I remember one Valentine's Day a colleague of mine came into my office in a huff. He snickered, flailing his arms in an expansive gesture of frustration. His eyeballs rolled back in his head as he groaned, "do you know I counted 42 pieces of red clothing on women today?" You know the typical, red blouses, little earrings that are worn to celebrate the day. He was clearly exasperated by the whole thing. "Why do women do this kind of thing anyway?"

I grinned as he flopped into a chair. "What's the real problem Dennis?" "I don't get it," he said, "You know I can't win with what I get her. She says she doesn't want anything, but you know if I don't get *something* I will never hear the end of it. And the worst is I have to get something bigger and better every year, its hopeless!"

I didn't think it was the best time to tell him that for some women it is probably one of the few times in a year that they can count on some kind of validation. A time when someone openly tells them that they are special, loved and cherished. Some women *and men* need to hear the words and see it on paper, some don't. This difference depends on expectations.

Expectation for Valentines is usually based in childhood celebrations, and the meaning that was placed on the day. This is driven home daily by media messages "to show her you care, give her a ...fill in the blank." We know that Valentine's Day can add to our loneliness and depression if we are not in a relationship, because it reminds us that we are alone in the world. There is no mirror image, no one to validate who we are, make us feel special.

On the other hand, when we are in a relationship there are all of these things we need to do to nurture each other. As my coworker above stated, it feels like a no win situation. As the relationship evolves, building little traditions of our own, we find less need to be validated in this way. But, it is only when we see *ourselves* as special that we stop looking to other people to show us our core beauty. The love we want is really inside, in our core self, and not external to us.

Feeling that someone *should* buy candy, roses or other romantic gifts is far from romantic for the buyer or the receiver. Even so, buying some routine gift that means little to the sender or recipient is meaningless, unless it is part of a belief system that was nurtured from childhood. So, make that a part of your discussions as you get to know each other. If you can't see yourself doing it, then you better get that straight up front.

People often feel guilty and stressed when they don't live up to another's idealized romantic expectations. Planning romantic moments together can be fun, energizing and cement the relationship. That said, it is only fun *if* you share the idealized expectation. This doesn't have to be expensive trips, and it can be finding creative ways to get away from the kids for a few hours. There are many ways to show love that costs nothing. Love notes placed in a clean shirt, unexpected phone calls to each other to say you were thinking of each other, the list is endless.

What helps is to find out where the guilt is coming from and discuss this honestly with your loved one. If you don't like doing Valentines, but it is important to the other person, ask yourself what it would take to make it happen. Could you live with this? Could you find another way to show you care? If someone needs more than you can give, then find out why they need it and what keeps you from giving it. This in and of itself will deepen the relationship.

So, what makes people feel loved? A better question might be, "How have we *learned* to feel loved?" This is different for everyone. Some people need gifts, while others would rather have your time, eye contact and to really be seen or have their efforts recognized. Some people need to have things *done for them* and that makes them feel loved. From a gender standpoint, men tend to experience love through sex, while women experience it through physical closeness and communication.

There are many other ways we feel loved, but in the long run it is someone taking the time to know what makes us tick. This makes us feel recognized and validated. As you get clarity on needs and wants assume nothing, talk to each other about what is wanted and needed.

- Get straight what you both need to "feel" the energy and passion of the relationship.
- Find your beauty and sense of worth within you, no one can see it if you can't.
- Find meaningful and creative ways to express your love that is shaped by both of your expectations and needs. Make a game of it; exploring these ideas can be fun.
- Gratitude helps, what does your partner give to the relationship that keeps you around? Let him or her know that these things are important to you.

- Talk to each other! The *Valentine Tradition* may not be all that important to either of you. If it is, could it be expressed in a way that is agreeable to both? Share your thoughts, wants and needs. What can you live with?

Besides all of this, feigned sugary sweetness is the opposite of true love. From the perspective of the relationship, love is a life time of give and take. Love always stands alone. Love needs nothing in the eye of the beholder. When we are loved deeply, we can feel love's power radiating back and forth, from the heart. Like an ancient dance moving in rhythm to the beat of our soul.