

What is Love?: An Opinion

Felice Dunas, PhD

We take our Western concept of love for granted, yet the cultures from which our medicine evolved thinks quite differently than we do about it. This is important for you to understand because the texts you read may use words that you know, like *love*, but meanings that you don't. As a result, it is easy to misdiagnose a patient or misinterpret the necessary treatment.

I once worked with a middle-aged Chinese woman who had come to the U.S. as a child. She explained that in her home, emotions were not expressed. She never felt very high or very low. She lived in a comfortable world but was aware that other people were different. She was fond of her husband, cared deeply for him but felt minimal passion. She described the relationship as appropriate and good. It was helpful to her when I explained that supporting *yin qi* would allow her to become more receptive to her husband. Cultivating *yin* could grow the marriage and alleviate the menopausal problems for which she sought treatment. I told her that we could use the medicine to merge her culture of origin and Western culture by helping her feel more receptive to everything, including love as it is defined in the West. She was very excited about this, but not all patients would be.

Love, as we know it, is the result of a Western concept of self developed over the course of 2,500 years starting from Plato down to Aristotle, the Stoics, St. Paul and the continuing evolution of biblical translation. Later on, European philosophers also tremendously influenced our view. Currently, psychologists, neuroscientists and self-help gurus define consciousness and selfhood for us.

However, the Chinese philosophies do not envisage an individual, inward-looking, autonomous self as we have in the West. They do not perceive themselves as unique, emotional people needing cultivation of the self.

Chuang Zi was an influential Chinese philosopher who lived during the 4th century BCE. When his wife died, initially he felt sadness. Then he sat on a rock and meditated on the changes of *qi* and realized that death is nothing but a transformation (a dispersal) of *qi* the same way that birth is a transformation (aggregation) of *qi*. At that, his sadness dissipated and he felt joy. His followers found this story philosophically uplifting and the source of great wisdom. But we would say he is being incredibly callous and insensitive, that he has a big problem in not acknowledging his grief and that he is likely to get cancer as a result of his emotional emptiness/stagnation. Same patient, different prognosis from the Eastern and Western acupuncturist.

This has to be seen with reference to the major philosophies of China. In Confucianism, the focus would be on duty, responsibility, care, kindness and obedience. The translation of the Confucian *ren* as "compassion" is misleading. *Ren* is a state of family and social harmony that occurs when everybody behaves according to their duties and takes care of others. It is based on ethics, morality, obligation and respect, not love. We must also remember that to the Confucians, there was nothing worse than losing control, which passionate, romantic love can lead to. Similarly, the Daoist does not "love" the Dao. Ideally, the Daoist witnesses and, with great dedication,

experiences the Dao. But there is nothing personal about one's relationship to it. No self.

The old pictograph for "love" had "belching" at the top, a heart and "gracious gait" (as in the walk of a beautiful woman). "Belching" was later replaced by a "hand" and a "covering over the heart" and "gracious gait." The modern Chinese removed the "heart" from the character so that now it looks very much like the character for "friendship."

Going back to the philosophies of China, all considered "desire" the root of most of our psychological and existential problems. Love is a form of desire. When we are in love, we crave that person intensely. In Asian cultures, there has always been an awareness of sex, jealousy and despair over not having the person one wishes. But these are not considered positive experiences and are not to be cultivated.

Does this mean that snuggling with someone with whom your entire being feels a "connection" is not inherent to human nature? Can it not be found in TCM medical theory? One of the many areas of greatness in our medicine is its range and flexibility. Absolutely everything that any of our patients experience can be defined and understood within the theoretical constructs of TCM. This is the universality, the inherent correctness of it. People whose belief systems and perceptions of life are utterly different all find answers here. We all find wisdom that reflects our beliefs even if they directly contradict those of our professional ancestors, the people through whom this medicine was brought to the world.

The capacity to feel and express love comes from every aspect of who we are and is not limited to a particular "place" inside. It isn't stored within our water element reserves. Infants and children, who radiate a compelling, pure and adoring love, have inherently weak kidneys. It isn't the result of an abundance of *qi*. The weakest among us, the wounded, infirmed and dying, express heroism in their belief and experience of the extraordinary nature of ordinary love. It is not born of an organ. All organs lay the foundation for different experiences and expressions of love. The liver allows us to feel warmth and kindness, the lungs the bliss of bonding, the heart bursts forth enthusiasm and laughter, the spleen allows us to know love and the kidneys are the river from which love drinks to become wisdom.

When practicing, consider the culture of origin for each patient. Realize that the structure of their personality and relationship to the world may be foundationally different than yours. It is imperative to strive for results in alignment with the worldview they hold, not the one you hold. We are the first generations to integrate this medicine into American culture and may not be accurate in our interpretations. As players in an ongoing medical expansion, mistakes and corrections are inevitable.

If we see love as a force pervading everything, our lives become its expression. Essential Loving = Essential Being. We find love within this medicine and use it for healing. We grow TCM in the soil of our culture such that it nourishes Western patients as it has handsomely fed those on the other side of the world whose beliefs contradict our own. We bring a gift, a blessing and a new dimension with our unique brand of love.

MAY 2010