

Red



DISCOVERING
*a LOVE that LASTS in a CULTURE
that DOESN'T BELIEVE it CAN*

NEAL SAMUDRE

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RETHINK CREATIVE PRESS

ARLINGTON, TX

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Rethink Creative Press
401 Pebble Way #139
Arlington, TX 76006

Created in the United States of America

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INTRODUCTION

For the longest time, there were only two sure things I knew about love: one, it hurts like hell; and two, it ends.

I knew this because of my parents. For years, I watched them bicker and rage until the small strand of their marriage finally snapped into a heavy legal dispute and complicated emotions. I always wondered what sort of thread wove them together, because if it was love, I wasn't sure I wanted that.

I also knew this because of culture. Many people in our society take to the podium with messages like "getting married young never works" or "getting married at all never works." I didn't know why culture preached this. Maybe, a few too many celebrity couples have broken up, dashing their hopes on love ever working. All I knew was that people chose to highlight the possible oblivion with love, and I was convinced that this was all there was to it.

But then, I heard a man say that love changes us, and I thought that maybe this is why love hurts and sometimes ends. Change, like love, is never a pretty process. It sets us on fire and melts off our imperfections, all with the intention of making us better people in the end. And becoming better so often involves facing the monsters we don't want to face.

After hearing this, I realized that I doubted love because I feared change. I chose to see the worst in love because I was scared of going through the fire to refine myself. I didn't trust it to make me better in the end. I only thought it would leave me bruised and burned.

Yet, things are different now. I'm no longer afraid of change, and I'm no longer afraid to love deeply and passionately. I don't see the oblivion

waiting with love's end anymore. I've passed through to the other side, and it taught me some things on love.

I used to doubt love because I knew that it hurt. But love only hurts because it changes us. This is no indication to doubt it. Rather, this is indication to believe in it all the more. The things that change us, make us into better people, are worth believing in, even if they hurt.

Love is raw, gritty, and messy, but it is in the mess that we change. And maybe, this is the truth we need to highlight more than anything with love: that it is not here as a condemnation or burden, but rather exists to preserve us, if only we choose to make it last.

I used to be love's greatest critic, but that was before it changed me. Here's the story of how that happened:

CHAPTER ONE

SINGLE

1.1 How I Learned to Love Myself

I always thought of writers as astronauts because they could somehow float in their minds with no gravity and let their imagination bump heads on the heavenly realms above. It seemed so beautiful that writers- and really any creative- could let wonder captivate them, propel them to see something more than the gloom and doom of the world. But unless they're crazy successful, we shrug our shoulders at artists like this. We mark them as being silly, not reliable, and not grounded within the gravity of present day life.

Yet it's so fascinating that artists can create out of a sense of beauty that others can't always see. It's honestly what caused me to struggle as a writer. I have this peculiar tendency at times to see the world as it is, but when that happens, I find my art suffers, along with my hope.

All this to say: I'm a naturally cynical person. It's something I'm still learning to combat.

It's odd how we choose to dwell on the negative aspects of life rather than celebrate the many wondrous blessings there are. I believe it's somehow easier to see the negativity because life can seem empty after a number of failed attempts. We can be impatient people, wrestling with a certain longing, yet see it denied several times, forcing us to see life as nothing more than a parade of getting up and falling back down again. It's easy to see life through a negative lens.

And at one point in my life, I was highly cynical about love and relationships.

For a brief time during college, I gave up pursuing relationships. In my heart, I desired it, just like any normal person does. But after a string of failed attempts at relationships, I grew callous in my heart. It didn't beat with hope or optimism. It just sank low with bitterness. And since the brain and heart are often in cahoots with each other, my brain concocted lies and cheap rationalizations to justify my bruised heart.

When you choose to live within your pessimism, there are a couple roads you could take: you can either wallow in your self-pity, rationalize the situation to make yourself feel better, draw others into your mess so they can give you the attention you desire, or change and work to be an inspiration for others. I took the middle road between drowning in self-pity and being overly logical. The problem with these two options is that I had concealed my feelings from the rest of the world. I had this grand idea that I could solve my desire and cynicism by myself, if only I spent more time writing and diving into my thoughts.

At the Student Union area of my college, I would carry my computer over to a corner table by a window that I loved. Being at this corner table made me feel like I had charge over who came and talked to me. The Student Union area was always bustling with people, but the corner table was far enough from the main traffic that I could remain by myself if I wanted to. Also, at the corner table, no one could sneak up on me. I could see everyone who was in the room and everyone who was coming my way. Nothing surprised me.

I mention this corner table because it's where I spent much of my time writing and thinking about relationships. In the Student Union area, there would be couples cuddling with each other on the couches, holding hands, and throwing back their heads to laugh at what possibly seemed to be some of the worst jokes ever. They were happy they weren't alone. And I was in the corner, leaning over the table, studying them and wondering if I could ever be that happy.

I would be lying to you if I didn't say I often daydreamed of girls coming to my corner table, sitting with me, and exclaiming their love for me. That would have made the search so much easier. But no one did that, and part of me wondered why.

My mind was spiraling down to the bedrock of self-loathing, a pit as large as the Grand Canyon. I could feel my back slamming against the rocky ground, paralyzing me from ever moving again. I felt stuck, like I couldn't get back to a more positive view on relationships.

But as a saving grace, my logic entered in and told me some things that gave me a little hope:

You should use this time to work.

The fates say you aren't ready for a relationship yet.

You're suppose to do something great before a relationship takes up your time.

There it was: my mind rationalizing that I wasn't in a relationship because I had work to do.

I read of writers who produced one compelling work after the other, and this life always appealed to me. I imagined that if I really put my mind to it, I could publish a new book every two months (impossible I know, but I was naïve then). I could pack up my bags, travel up to an unknown cabin somewhere, and shut myself in, not leaving until I wrote my next book. I

figured that the artists who lived this sort of life had no partner by their side. So this is the life I dreamed about: a life where I could live as a hermit in the middle of nowhere, listening only to my own inner dialogue chant away possible new books.

I falsely believed that the life of a leader, someone who works to change culture, is an intentionally solitary path. In order to do your best work, you must be alone.

But this was simply a justification my logic gave to make me feel better about myself. What I found instead is that the life of a leader can be unintentionally lonely.

And so I sat at the corner table, dreaming up scenarios of women talking to me. But then I would shut down those thoughts the next minute so I could put pen to paper. Not many people bothered me, and I didn't tell others how I felt. I just continued writing, hunched over the table like I was inspecting tiny particles on the tabletop.

The solitary life was a lonely one, but it was the life I had chosen, or at least, what the shoddy logic of my mind chose to believe. It made me feel better about myself rather than being a hopelessly sad person wearing my emotions on my sleeve. It was better to not tell anyone, to shut myself in, and busy my upset mind with work.

Yet the problem was, I was only busying myself with work because I was avoiding what lied underneath the surface. Beneath my fortified exterior was this deep haunting feeling nipping away at my core.

I thought, maybe I wasn't with someone because I wasn't good enough.

Looking back, I can't believe I actually thought this. It's not a rare idea to have in our society. It spreads among us like the Black Plague of love and relationships. Many of us struggle with this idea that love is for lovely people, and if we're not lovely, then we were never designed to love somebody.

But this is hogwash- a lie born from the depths of Hell, where Satan concocts everything evil in the cosmos.

The mere fact that we are alive, have beating hearts inside our chest, and emotions swirling around in our minds means that we were designed to be vulnerable with others. It's in our very nature to love, imbedded in the way procreate, interact, and yearn for community. We were designed to love, and our inability at snagging a relationship for ourselves doesn't change that fact.

But the trick is discerning whether this means to love someone in a relationship or love our friends and family, because if we're honest with ourselves, we know not everyone is meant to be in a relationship. A relationship is not an obligation set forth by the universe. We desire it because it's beautiful, not because it's necessary.

Yet love, in the form of brotherly affection and community, is something we really need to saturate our existence. There is a large difference between the love of a friend and the love of a spouse, and while both are great, only one is obligated for our human flourishing. Deep friendship, strong enough to cut through our bones and rest in our hearts, is a requirement for this human life we live.

I say all this because maybe many of us are single because we haven't yet learned what it looks like to love ourselves. And maybe, we can't love ourselves because we have trouble recognizing the love already present in

our lives. We can't see that we are in loving relationships with our friends and family. And because we can't receive that friendship love for ourselves, we can't truly love who we are because we see ourselves as empty of love.

Love for ourselves begins with the love we experience around us. And when I say the love we experience, I don't mean in the terms of a dating relationship. I mean love in general. I mean the intimacy shared between family. I mean the devotion given to friends. I mean the love we experience daily, but never fully realize we do.

It's this kind of love we need to survive, and it's this kind of love we need so that we may appreciate who we are.

One day, I was writing at my usual corner table, accidentally smearing my pencils marks as I worked across the page, when a friend came by with a sandwich wrapped in her hands. Her eyes were genuine and sincere, and she said, "Could I join you?"

This happens often when you choose to do your work in a public place, but I figured that when you refuse to make eye contact with anyone else, and look as if you don't realize the world moving in a rush around you, people typically tend to leave you alone. My friend, however, thought otherwise. She saw me by myself, scribbling away thoughts on page, and she figured I could use some company.

When she asked to join me, the look in her eyes was so warm and jovial that I loosened the grip on my pencil, and said, "Of course you can."

I scrambled to organize my sheets scattered across the tabletop as she unwrapped her sandwich. For the next half hour, we talked, caught up on life, and laughed over the silliest events that occurred in the past few days. It was a refreshing experience, like taking a breath after emerging from deep

waters. For a moment, I could feel the machinery in my mind begin to slow down, as if it were taking the time to fill up on oil. And then, I was focused entirely on living in that brief pause of invigorating friendship.

It was then that I realized something: love is not something you can accomplish alone. It is not solitary.

This might seem like an obvious truth, but it really isn't. Yes, you do need two people in order for a love between people to operate, but there is also the neglected aspect of loving yourself. And while it might seem like you can love yourself by your own devices, this isn't possible.

Truth is, you can't fully learn to love yourself without the help of others. You need people to communicate the mysteries raging on inside you, the mysteries you've tried to solve for so long but couldn't.

It's not possible to ever achieve love alone. Every type of love, including the love you give yourself, requires the nourishment of community.

And after sitting at that corner table with my dear friend, I felt nourished in some mysterious way. She brought me out of myself, out of the pit of busyness and sadness corrupting my ability to enjoy life. For a short moment of time, I could feel my hard heart lighten and dance in a wonder my brain didn't fully comprehend.

As we sat there, laughing at life's sense of humor, I rejoiced in my inner most being that finally I had known what it was like to appreciate myself. I finally felt at peace with my warring self-esteem, acknowledging that love for another was possible for me; it's just taking its sweet time to flourish.

1.2 Why I Chose to Not Be Pressured into Love

Around this same time, I was sitting on a staircase with one of my friends, when he said something that struck me as odd.

“You ever feel like you have to have a girlfriend?” he asked, his voice hushed so it wouldn’t echo in the stairwell.

“I always feel that way, but I know I shouldn’t.”

“Well, I know we shouldn’t,” he began. “But, if you think about it, it makes sense. Look at it this way: we missed our chance at having childhood sweethearts, so we cross that off the list. We also missed our chance at high school sweethearts, cause I don’t know about you but I was stupid in high school. And now, we’re in college! This is our last chance at finding a girl. We’re never going to be with these many people ever in our lifetime. Once we enter the real world, it’s going to get much harder to find someone to date. We’ll have to find someone in our field. And what if we’re in a male-dominated field?”

“Well then, life becomes hard,” I said.

We both slouched on that staircase, our chins resting on our hands, dreaming of all the possible ways we could find a girlfriend in the remaining time we had left in college. If I’m being honest, I felt pressure in that moment. It was as if my friend’s anxiety over the situation contaminated my thinking also. I started to believe I had to find a girl soon, or risk a life of loneliness.

I’m convinced that this was one of the many factors feeding into my cynical perspective on love. To believe that it was necessary to find love before a certain amount of time made me doubt love more than believe in it.

It goes like this: you know those times when you set a billion alarms on your phone to remind you of an important task, and you think you would never forget that task, until you lose your phone, get wrapped up in

something else, and completely forget the task? Those times frustrate me, but they taught me a valuable lesson. Sometimes, it doesn't help when we pay more attention to something. It just makes us more frustrated when we don't accomplish the task we are paying more attention to.

It's the same thing with love. When we obsess over finding the right person before a self-perceived deadline we have floating in our minds, it becomes more difficult, more disheartening when we don't find that person fast enough. We think the search for love should be easy and manageable, but when we find that it isn't, we get angry, hopeless, and doubtful about love ever working in our favor.

Deadlines on love don't help us in our search for it. They only make us angry.

When I left down the staircase, my mind still whirring from the conversation I just had with my friend, I realized I was getting more doubtful on love the more I felt pressured to find it. By the time I reached the end of the staircase, I made a claim that I wasn't going to feel pressured into anything. It was only ruining me.

We are people of freedom. We like to stretch out our arms and move around in an open and free space. We don't like being constricted. Sometimes being constricted helps us work harder towards the things we need to accomplish, because the more pressure you place on something, the more it longs for freedom. But deadlines for task that aren't completely in our control don't work, because then, freedom seems impossible. And the less possible freedom becomes, the more bitter we become. This is how both life and love work.

Love is more precious, more beautiful, and more appreciated when it coincides with freedom. In other words, love is more powerful when it's a choice, not an obligation.

I had a friend once tell me that culture exalts marriage and relationships to appear as if it's an obligation, like it's part of some checklist to life. You grow up, get an education, fall in love, get married, work, and then wait to die. This is how the American Dream operates. So when my friend told me this, I agreed with him. The greater culture does press love on us, and as a result, one can get cynical about relationships because they don't feel as if they are choosing. They're simply just following after societal norms.

But much of this is self-perceived. These pressures only press on us because we allow them to. If love is better as a choice, then start first by choosing not to be pressured into it.

A couple days after that conversation, I was perfectly fine being single. In fact, I had come to terms with it. Sure, I wanted someone by my side, but I didn't want that desire to corrupt my ability to live in the present. So I continued sitting at my table in the corner of the Student Union, simply writing and commenting on love rather than engaging in it.

Yet, an odd thing happened once I chose to not be affected by the pressure of love. Once I stopped looking for it and stopped being burdened by it, it came.

Love has that stealthy quality to it. It likes to blindside us. It likes to come when we least expect it because only then does it have the ability to sweep us into something wonderful.

CHAPTER TWO

IT'S COMPLICATED

2.1 Why Love Should Make You Laugh

When you think about it, there is something so whimsical and amusing about love. It's one of the only qualities or emotions in people that shifts us out of being boring individuals, or people stuck in mediocrity and routine. Love has some special power that subverts the natural tendencies of this world, the kind that constricts us to stay on certain, dull paths.

I've always wondered why love is so silly, so off the wall in its expression, and I've found that it's part of its foundation. I know many couples who are the definition of boring because they don't talk to each other or do anything fun like take a night out on the town or make a meal that's different than something you warm in the microwave for three minutes. They just sit and watch television with a world of space between them. Between the two, there's no slight grace of the hand, no endearing words spoken, and not even a warm glance to communicate love when words just won't cut it. This boggles my mind, and I know this is just the dynamic of some couples, but I can't imagine a love where the greatest risk taken is who gets to control the remote.

A love characterized by boredom and a fear of the ridiculous is something I'm not sure I want.

This might be my own personal preference, but I believe if we all dig hard enough, we'll find that love, at least at its conception, transforms us into

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