

What Young Love Should Know About Old Love

In a 2005 interview with Larry King, Billy Graham said of his wife Ruth, "... I love her so much. And I love her more now — interestingly, I love her more now, and we have more romance now than we did when we were young."

Romance ... in old age? Young people snicker at the thought. At best, they write it off as the childish sentimentality and clouded memory of doddering old age.

But what if ... what if they are wrong? What if a couple married for so long really does experience romance that is strong, that stirs the blood? My friend, Frederica Mathewes-Green, described Ruth and Billy's relationship as having "all the lamps still blazing." Many engaged couples dream of "growing old together;" they just find old couples amusing and can't picture them with their "lamps still blazing."

How can young people comprehend "old love" when their only experience is "new love" that is framed by flirtation, excitement and pleasure? Youth experiences the heights of soaring passion but often doesn't quite know how to cope with the aftermath when their emotions plunge into deep valleys where they question the validity and transience of love. In the absence of a marriage commitment, they have good reason to fear ... and to feel exploited. After the intense and volatile emotions that are unleashed in the early explorations of new love, feelings can rebound from a crest of great excitement and exuberance to an undertow of emptiness or isolation. Tears of happiness can suddenly turn into a seeming desert of loneliness. These realities of our emotional makeup speak to the need for the security of vows of commitment "‘til death do us part."

New love is about a couple learning to cope with what it means to be naked, not merely physically but also emotionally. This is especially true when they have said by their words and actions not just "I desire you" or "you excite me" but "I need you." Often the more intense and complete their intimacy, the more exposed they feel afterwards. And there is something in our nature — particularly in youth — that rebels at the experience of being vulnerable, that feels angry at having self-sufficiency and independence eroded. Lovers can be, and usually are, intensely territorial, responding with anger and outrage at any hint of infidelity by their mates or encroachment by a flirtatious interloper. At the same time they feel unease as they realize that being a couple increasingly diminishes their autonomy. Add to this a confusing mixture of needs, the fact that freedom-loving young lovers are driven to one another's embrace not merely by physical desire alone but by a deep, though often unrecognized, emotional need to belong. Surely, we mate because God hardwired us to do so.

Both poets and comedians have chronicled the irony and hilarity of all this pushing and pulling. It's hard to say which is more often thought: "The path of true love never did run smooth" or "What fools these mortals be!"

Old love has a better understanding than new love of the dual dimension of intimacy. In youth, the fireworks of physical passion — the God-designed motivating force that initially drives us to mate at the outset — can obscure the quieter but equally critical process of bonding that is occurring with every tender touch and embrace. This process of cementing the two together is seen only indirectly through its mysterious consequences, something that the Scriptures refer to when it speaks of “the two becoming one.” As important and consequential as is the observable physical union of the couple — with its potential to create new life — is this unseen emotional bonding that accompanies sexual intimacy, which, if properly nourished, can unite them for life to nourish any new life with which God blesses them. But youth, caught up in the tumult and excitement of new love, has a limited awareness of how the intimacy of physical contact, or even mere eye contact, is at work to knit them together with emotional bonds of connectedness, to produce an ever stronger sense of wholeness, of completeness, of oneness. The life stories of Ruth and Billy Graham dramatically illustrate one of love’s great paradoxes: the surrender of their autonomy in marriage did not diminish them (as many today fear), but the process of becoming husband and wife produced an expanding fulfillment of each of their personhoods, just the opposite of what might be expected.

God made the business of establishing and maintaining a couple’s unity compelling by making sexual intimacy — between a man and a woman who love each other deeply and tenderly — one of the greatest pleasures of which humans are capable. We see a parallel process in nature when an oyster produces a pearl: each time a couple exchanges some kind of intimacy, the bond between them grows deeper and more satisfying so that the satisfaction of being one displaces the satisfaction of being autonomous. And just as the oyster makes the pearl ever more lustrous by adding coat after coat of shell-forming fluid, a couple can produce a relationship of priceless quality simply by reaching out to each other day in and day out through words, glances and caresses.

Sadly, young love doesn’t often see examples today of what old love can be. Little wonder at their youthful skepticism of Graham’s claim that a couple married for over a half a century can actually experience romance that is real, that competes with what they knew when they were young. We cannot know whether such skepticism was at play when an interviewer asked the Graham’s daughter Ruth if her mom, bedridden with degenerative osteoarthritis, and her dad, infirm with Parkinson’s, were still madly in love. Or perhaps the interviewer expressed the wistful hope of a postmodern mind. If so, the Graham daughter nourished that hope when she replied, “Very much so. Very much so ... They look at each other with such love and tenderness. It’s very sweet. And he says that this is the best time of their lives.”

New love compared to old love is somewhat akin to the comparison of new silver with old silver. Certainly the former possesses a dazzling brilliance. But the latter's tarnish defines the elegance and artistry of its design. The marks of old silver's age speak to the history of its service, its significance and its value. Old silver embodies a rich storehouse of memories that gives it a luster which an immature piece of new silver, for all its inherent value and shiny surface, has not yet attained.

By Dr. Janice Shaw Crouse

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