

The Dubious Blessing of Love

by

EM ARIZA

***Free*editorial** 

The hippies were wrong when they told everyone to “make love, not war.” Believe me, they were wrong! They were way off.

Think about it for a moment. Isn't it true that ultimately —notwithstanding a few impressive exceptions—, what starts out as love often ends in war, much to the delight of lawyers everywhere? Therefore, war is an implicit part of love, and vice versa.

Wait a moment, perhaps I'm making a bit of a mess of this.

I'll try to clarify what I mean here. First of all, I should point out that these ideas probably began troubling me because it was a rainy day and, to make matters worse, I didn't have my usual sports newspaper to accompany my breakfast of coffee, pomegranate juice, buttered toast and a bakery treat of some kind. The absence of the sports news always tends to plunge me into a depression. Of course, it's only natural, because I didn't have anywhere to look while I was eating, and without something specific and important to focus on my thoughts inevitably start to wander.

So while I was satisfying the vital need for sustenance, without anything better to do another equally vital need began stirring inside me: the need to think.

No doubt the origin of these thoughts had a lot to do with the fact that yesterday afternoon, when I went to buy my favorite sports paper, the news stand where I normally buy it was closed, and the news-stand owner had left a sign explaining the reason for his absence. That reason was his sister's wedding.

It's alright. I understood. I'm an understanding guy when it comes to the failings of others, in spite of the irreparable harm done to me at breakfast due to being unable to read the sports headlines while polishing off my pomegranate juice and toast. All this led me to reflect on the news-stand owner and his sister, although little by little these reflections led me down other winding roads.

The first thing that came to my mind was a question: *Does everybody get married except me? Does everyone, even the news-stand owner's sister, get a shot at matrimonial love except me?*

The truth is that I didn't know anything about the news-stand owner's sister, but I was starting to dislike her because it was obvious that she, like nearly everyone else in the world, had bought into that cliché that every fairy tale ends with: “and in the end they got married and lived happily ever after.”

At this point in life, that phrase is always unsettling for those of us who are still single.

And so the unanswered questions went on: “Isn’t there any other reasonable way for people to organize their existence? Is being single really so bad?”

The truth is, now that I think about it, I have to admit that I have a pretty good life... especially, ironically, compared to my married friends. I don’t have to change diapers, or be woken up in the middle of the night by crying babies. I don’t have to endure the little woman’s reproachful glares for having a few beers or watching soccer on TV, or not leaving the toilet seat down or enjoying a good action movie. And in turn, single women don’t have to put up with us and our personal peculiarities. And above all, we only see other people when we feel like it, not as an everyday obligation. “Actually,” I thought, “it’s not so bad at all.”

Yet, despite these indisputable advantages of the single life, for a moment I was struck by the worry that if I stay single all my life I may never know what true love is.

This thought really brought me down, and once again I cursed the newsstand owner for having deprived me of my sports paper. If he had fulfilled his obligation I have no doubt that I would be concerned with other more important matters, like the last unfair penalty given to my favorite team. But there was nothing I could do. I didn’t have my beloved newspaper and I couldn’t hold back the constant parade of malevolent thoughts about the newsstand owner and his sister. In short, as a result of my lack of reading material, I was now worrying about whether love would be something forever out of my reach.

But suddenly I realized: what on earth was I thinking? Of course I’d had the experience of true love before! I’d felt it for my parents and siblings, for friends, for a dog, for a soccer team and for an ex-girlfriend. In that order.

“Go away, depression!” I told myself. “Of course I’ve known the dubious blessing of love!” This is an indisputable fact. But then it led me to ask myself, just what is love anyway? I confess that I still don’t know what it is, despite having experienced it.

Life gets terribly complicated when you end up thinking too much merely because you have nothing better to do.

The uncertainty that this question created led me to the conclusion that it was time to turn to Zoilo. As you know, Zoilo is an expert in almost everything because of all the books he reads, and his expertise has been extremely useful to me, although at times I don’t understand everything he says. Actually, I hardly understand anything he says.

I looked at my watch to make sure it wasn't too early for my friend. Having confirmed that it was a good time to call him, I picked up my cellphone.

"Good morning," I said when I heard his voice.

"Good morning," he replied when he heard mine.

"Are you awake?"

"I hope so, because otherwise I'm in the middle of a nightmare in which somebody calls me up far too early."

"Sorry, but I urgently need to ask you about something that's really bothering me."

"At this time of the morning?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Love. I mean, I don't know what it is."

I could sense that the question had hit him like a gunshot at point-blank range, because a long silence ensued. I waited prudently until it seemed to have gone on for too long, when I began to worry that something had happened to him; or, more likely, that he'd fallen asleep again.

I asked: "Are you still there?"

After another moment of silence, I heard him answer:

To faint, to dare, to be furious,
rough, tender, liberal, shy,
encouraged, fatal, dead, alive,
loyal, traitor, coward and bold.

Not finding, apart from the good, center or repose.

To show oneself joyful, sad, humble, haughty,
angry, valiant, fugitive,
satisfied, offended, suspicious.

Hiding one's face to obvious disappointment;
drinking poison as if smooth liquor,
forgetting the benefit, loving the harm.

Believing that heaven fits in a hell,

giving one's life and soul for a disappointment.

This is love; whoever has experienced it knows.”

Oh my God! I froze completely. I'd never heard such powerful poetry, and, what's more, recited by someone who'd just woken up.

“Wow!” I couldn't help but exclaim. “Did you just come up with all that on the spot...?”

“It's by Lope de Vega.”

“Lopez who? Do I know him?”

“Not Lopez. *Lope*,” he corrected me, and then went on: “The ‘z’ ending on Spanish surnames means ‘son of’...”

I interjected: “Oh, so now I get why so many politicians' surnames end in ‘z’... because they're all a bunch of sons of...”

“Could be. Good point,” he replied approvingly, although I noted a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “But the point is that Lopez originally meant ‘son of Lope’, like Sanchez meant ‘son of Sancho’, or Martínez meant ‘son of Martin’.”

“Right. So what you're saying is that the guy who wrote that poem about love is called Lope.”

“Yes. Lope de Vega.”

“Well, no, I don't think I've met him,” I said, after searching my memory for a moment.

“It's unlikely you would have met him personally,” he explained calmly, although again I thought I could detect a mildly ironic tone in his voice. “Seeing as how you weren't alive more than four hundred years ago, there's not much chance that you ever would have bumped into him on one of your walks in the park.”

I got the joke and I gave him the credit it was due. Obviously, I couldn't have met this Lope guy because he was far too old, and Zoilo had made a joke about it at my expense. That's the way he is, and although I never know whether he's laughing with me or at me, I buried the hatchet and moved on to what really concerned me.

I explained to him what had happened to my sports newspaper and the role that the news-stand owner's sister's wedding had played in the disaster.

“Do you think that you and I are wrong for staying single because if we don't get married we won't have anyone to love and care for us when we get

old?”

“It makes no difference. When you’re old, whether you’re married or not, you’ll have to go to a home for the elderly to be looked after, unless you have enough money to pay for in-home care. If you had kids, they’d be working hard to pay their mortgages and wouldn’t be able to look after you; at most, they’d come visit you on Sundays. The tradition of family members looking after each other ended a long time ago. It belongs to that era when the woman didn’t work outside the home and the whole family lived together.”

“Well, nearly everybody still gets married, and there must be a reason for it...”

“Yes, it’s the inertia of tradition, replied Zoilo. “Look, women have a higher social intelligence than men. That’s part of the explanation. And the other part is that women know exactly how to combine the advantages of the old traditions, like the big wedding bashes that all those fairy tale endings have sold them on, and the modern way of doing things, like having the same degree of sexual freedom as men.”

“Are you saying that women are smarter?”

“I’m saying that they have an amazing ability to adapt to the times and survive changes better than us.”

“Come on!”

“Give me a few minutes of your time and I’ll explain it with a little bit of history.”

“Oh, thanks. I love history.”

“Listen, then. When humans lived in caves, women depended on the hunter coming back to them so they could feed themselves and their offspring. Food security was the essential factor motivating female behavior, and to get it women tried to appear as attractive as possible and to promise exclusive sexual pleasure for the male returning from work bringing his earnings home, in the form of a dead antelope. It was even this need for security that would make a woman turn a blind eye if her man fooled around with the woman from the cave next door. It was so important to appear attractive in the eyes of the man who provided her with food that she simply had to accept his infidelity. She tried to be (or at least to seem to be) a one-man woman so that he wouldn’t leave her, while he could play around now and then with other women.”

He paused a moment, and then went on.

“But then came the age of the Roman Empire. It was a long period of progress and security, and women didn’t need men to feed them anymore.

With their social intelligence, women understood this and demanded equal status with men. They no longer put up with their husbands' infidelities while they had to be monogamous. They wanted the same privileges, including in love. So they started having affairs and orgies, managing their own money and taking part in politics, sports... In short, they started enjoying everything that until then had been typically male domains. A popular saying from those days sums it up very well: "The Roman men who govern the world are the only men in the world who are governed by their women."

I was captivated by Zoilo's story. I always learn so much from this guy!

"Then came the Middle Ages," he went on. "Once again, insecurity, ignorance, misery and hunger reigned. Women went back to their old cave-like behavior. So it wouldn't be until the twentieth century, just a short time ago, and only in the West, when women would again demand, and achieve, the same status as men in every field, because we're in another era of prosperity and security."

"Wow! They really are clever!"

"Of course, men give in because they're not so bright and because they can't live without the promise of pleasure represented by the female body; and women who know this, of course, take advantage of it. So, on the one hand, they carry on with the old tradition of finding a husband who can walk them down the aisle in a big white dress on the day of their wedding, just like in the fairy tales, and who after that will be able to do the odd jobs around the house. And that is what we call marriage. But, on the other hand, they want to be Roman women, with multiple relationships, control of their own finances, access to jobs that until recently were the exclusive domain of men, and in doing all this they give us inferiority complexes that we try to overcome with steroids in the gym. We try at least to keep up the appearance of being the physically stronger sex, since we've already lost the battle for the title of smarter sex."

I tried to take in everything Zoilo was saying, but my impression was that we had gotten lost with this exploration of history. Or at least, I had gotten lost. This was why I tried to get back to my original worry: "So anyway, in terms of love, what's the best marital status for men and women... single, married forever, multiple marriages, divorced, widowed...?"

"Any of the above," he replied, and then went on: "Look, until we come up with a better answer, the only purpose in life is to enjoy it, however much social customs and governments may try to stop us. In life, we all have to choose our own path, because life is an individual experience, and it's up to each individual to enjoy it, or to wallow in a perpetual state of depression, always longing for what we can't have, which will stop us from seeing the

benefits of what we do have.”

“But what about the experience of having children? Don’t we singles miss out on that?” I asked him uneasily. “Besides, if we all decide not to have any, the human race will end up disappearing.”

“First of all, if you want them, why do you need to get married to have kids? What’s stopping you?” And he added: “As for your second point, sooner or later the human race will disappear anyway. But in the meantime, I would recommend that you don’t take upon yourself the responsibility for the preservation of our species. Each one of us has enough on our hands just trying to be happy, which is the main obligation that we have in our lives. In any case,” he concluded, “I can assure you that if mankind disappears, the Universe will continue on its majestic course without us.”

In the end I think I understood Zoilo’s detailed explanations well enough for now, and they led me to the conclusion that in any kind of life it’s possible to find love, and any life can be a good one; that no marital status can guarantee happiness and, as a lesson to apply to my own life, I thought: “Why make myself miserable by allowing others, or tradition, to choose my life’s path, when I can make myself miserable by choosing it myself?”

For a moment I lost myself in deep contemplation, trying to work out the full implications of this thought. Finally, all I could do was exclaim: “Holy crap! Talking to Zoilo is always such a learning experience!”

I think you’ll agree with me if you think that statement of mine over. It’s pretty profound! And I came up it with just like that, intuitively. And little by little I’m starting to understand what it means.

I’m sure you’ll agree that if that statement had been made by some important figure it would have gone down in history, like that famous phrase, “I came, I saw, I conquered”, which I think Cassanova used when he was bragging about his hot night with a countess to a few of his friends. Or the line: “Never have so many owed so much to so few”, which we few who pay taxes in this country always use in reference to the many freeloaders who live off them. Or the one that goes: “He who acts may make a mistake, but he who does nothing is already mistaken.” I don’t even know who said that one, or what it means, but I like it.

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