

Fatal Loyalty

Love is the most urgent call to self-knowledge. It is in our relationships with other people that we learn our shortcomings or test our powers of giving and unselfishness. Sooner or later, in many people's lives, these lessons become so urgent and so painful that people turn beyond the relationship and beyond their own social circle for guidance. It doesn't matter how cool or how experienced a person is. Secretly or overtly, they are always curious to know how this thing works.

It begins, in childhood, with the agony aunts. I remember the magazines with their problem pages hidden under the desk in the school library, telling us about problems we hardly knew existed. Now there are special problem pages for teenagers read by pre-teens, which talk about "lurve" and give information on contraception and blow jobs.

The more practice you get, the more urgent is the need to accumulate knowledge and understanding as your mistakes get bigger and graver. Millions of people, over decades, have gone to marriage guidance or relationship counselling. Many of them learn what I learned, in a brief session of marriage guidance, which is how little we really listen to each other and how painful it can be when we really do. But if you want to

learn even more about the workings of love in a relationship, then you need to know about far more than just what happens between the two of you. You need to become archaeological.

I have done two processes in later adult life that I wish I had done sooner. Both taught me profound lessons about the root sources of our ability to love, and how we can reclaim and reshape them. Both deeply affected my view of my family and my intimate relationships.

The first process is called the Orders of Love. It was originally developed by a German priest-turned-psychotherapist called Bert Hellinger, and it is now taught internationally. Its underlying thesis – developed over many years and synthesising what he learned through working with the Zulu peoples of South Africa, and with further work in Western psychotherapies – is that love flows naturally through families and down the generations unless something happens to block it. Where there is an emotional problem in an individual, its cause is often a trauma or blockage further back in the family, which has distorted the flow of love. An Orders of Love workshop is an extraordinary and, to me, deeply mysterious and moving process, which involves participants nominating others to act out

the roles of their family members and then watching as the unconscious drama unfolds. These groups of family members are called constellations. By physically positioning these people instinctively in relation to one another some alchemy happens, in which participants involuntarily express the emotions felt by the original family members, even though they know nothing about them. With the skill of the facilitator, who moves people about and brings others in, the original family trauma is uncovered. And then the facilitator creates a ritual of acknowledgement and forgiveness, which liberates the original participant from their family role of unconscious duty and loyalty.

The noble aim of this work is to break the invisible but sometimes fatal loyalties that bind families together, even in unhappiness, and break the chain for future generations. I have twice spent the weekend doing an Orders of Love workshop and been profoundly moved by the process. Taking part in other people's constellations feels like a great privilege.

There are connections between the work done by Bert Hellinger and his followers and the work done in the Hoffman Quadrinity Process, which is also taught internationally. Bob Hoffman's genius was to

synthesise a number of forms of psychotherapy into an intensive eight-day residential process, which goes deeply into the way in which participants have learned about love through their families, and enables them to release the bad and deeply acknowledge the good. Both Hellinger and Hoffman acknowledge the intense and invisible power of what Hoffman calls “negative love”, that unconscious and self-limiting loyalty towards our families which leads us to adopt family roles and to suppress and sacrifice ourselves on behalf of family values, even when these are destructive. Hoffman also saw the human personality as being fourfold – an emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual self – and the work focuses on giving each of these aspects of the self a voice, and integrating these aspects through the course of the week.

The Hoffman Process is longer, more intensive, more explicit, more structured and better designed to integrate into your life than the Orders of Love. It leaves you feeling exhilarated but also grounded, with a bag full of techniques you can use once you leave the workshop environment. It also provides you with valuable backup from the Hoffman community, and a network of participants who can help reinforce what you have learned. The experience of Orders of Love is less integrated into normal

life though it works well with therapy, but it is also profound, especially when you take part in other people’s constellations and have the extraordinarily mysterious feeling of embodying the emotions of strangers. Each time I have done an Orders of Love workshop it has made me deeply question the separate nature of the individual human personality. On the contrary, it has shown me clearly that we aren’t separate at all. We are simply cells in one infinite human body, past and present, and, in the right circumstances, the experience of one is the experience of everyone. The boundaries between us are infinitely fine. This may be the message of the mystics, but in these two processes you can experience it.

Why would you want to give up your time and money to do this kind of work? I know that many people I meet, especially those who are disinclined to examine their emotions at the best of times, would rather break a leg than do what they would call “wallowing” in emotion with strangers.

Well, why wouldn’t you? Love is the central mystery and the greatest challenge of our lives. I read the story of a man who had nearly lost his life rowing across the Atlantic. He asked himself why he was

prepared to face death on the open ocean but found his personal life so difficult. “I think what it is is this,” he wrote. “When you are involved with other people, lovers and loved ones, it’s not in your control.” Somehow he found the challenge of the Atlantic simpler than the challenge of other people.

I can understand this. When I get it wrong in love the results can be devastating, for me and for other people. What I’ve learned through the work of Bert Hellinger and Bob Hoffman is that we *are* other people, and that knowledge is transformative. I have cried and laughed through these two processes, felt intensely, thought deeply. They have brought me some understanding and compassion, helped me open doors and mend fences in my own life, and given me insight into the roots of my own and other people’s behaviour.

Love isn’t a theory, it’s an experience and, above all, a practice. In carefully evolved processes like these two, conducted by trained and responsible people, you learn about love through direct experience, and it can change the way in which you lead your life. What I also like about these two processes is that the people who run them aren’t evangelical or

pressurising in any way. They only want people who really want to be there, doing the work when they are ready to do it. I wish I had found them earlier in my life. The details of how to contact these two organisations are at the back of the book.