

A Curriculum of Love

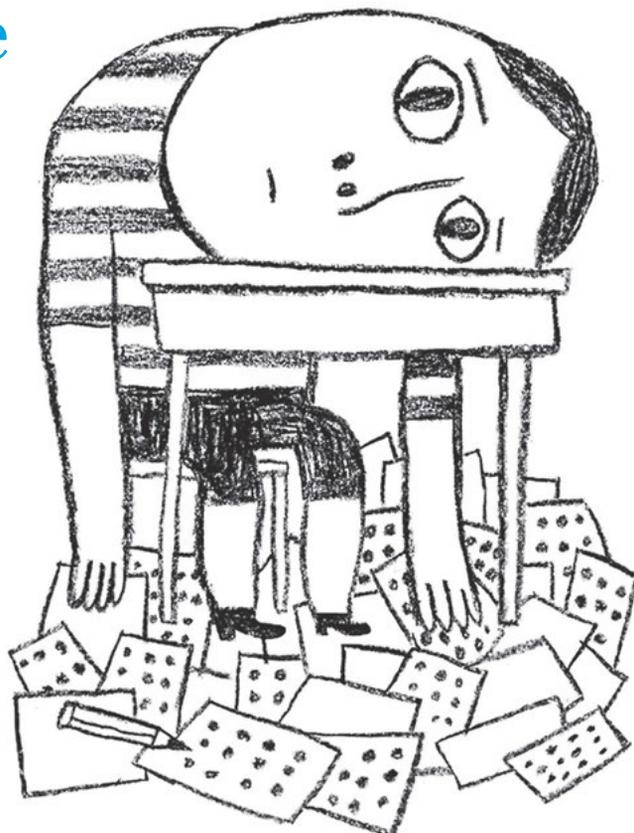
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PAUSE FOR A MOMENT and consider a curriculum that extends beyond merely practical schooling, past our standard materially-oriented instruction that fixates almost exclusively on the academic skills that promote professional success. Consider instead a curriculum centered in deep connectedness, a curriculum of love.

Where in their unfolding growth do our children learn about what might be the core human experience, from primal bonding within the womb to the final demise when a child weeps at her dying parent's bedside? Love in multifarious forms pervades experience: love of self, family, romantic partner, friend, pet, community, humankind, the earth, and even the stranger and the enemy that Judeo-Christian tradition exhorts us to embrace. Where is the schoolhouse door that opens to the divine realm of dreams, the contours of grief, the light of intuition, the sense of connection to the rivers? Perhaps love and the inner life do not seem like subjects students could possibly explore at a desk, on a computer, or in a lab. But there is a pedagogy that might make it accessible.

While considering such teaching we should not assume that teaching about love necessitates its practice. But an academic curriculum that delves deeply into the nature of love in several adventurous teachers' classrooms can be a springboard into an explicit school-wide practice of the compassion, empathy and generosity that *Tikkun's* Spiritual Covenant With America calls for. A syllabus of the highest regard for life's intimacy in our despiritualized education system is a radical beginning.

The introduction of such a curriculum can produce visceral push back in a society that fears exploration of our spiritual nature. Love is supposed to be private and school a place of public inquiry. A parent once reported me to the San Francisco Bay Area high school district where I taught when she read her daughter's journal entry on the topic I suggested "What is the color of love?" My student apologized for her parent's aggressiveness. The parent wasn't very loving, and my student told me she had actually felt an unexpected freedom writing that journal. What a loss it would be to deprive her of that opening.



Others might argue love doesn't belong in the curriculum because it is a soft non-academic subject and that by teaching it you risk turning your classroom into a New Age bubble. But I'm not talking about lessons encased in some kind of soft, airy sharing sessions. Love is a compelling and deeply challenging subject to undertake: layered, rich, transformative, demanding, and painful. It is a deep existential concern that can be investigated from multi-disciplinary perspectives, through philosophy, psychology, biology, history, literature, and theology. It has all the gravitas of any topic the academy can offer.

Young people from kindergarten through high school can be enabled to explore the subject at their respective developmental levels. A thoughtful teacher might help them begin as any rigorous academic thinker begins, by defining terms. What do we actually mean when we use the word love? This can be a lesson not only in love, but in learning precision of language. We may regard love as some singular nameable thing but a single word belies the depth and variety of its forms. The intimate breathing rhythms of a baby nestling in her mother's bosom is not the companionship of Huck and Jim rafting down the Mississippi, nor the longing of

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Odysseus for Penelope, or the outstretched arms of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

Even a second grade teacher can teach love in a sophisticated way, as long as the approach is developmentally appropriate. Rather than provide information, the teacher could take a constructive approach. For example, students could list all the examples of love they know about in life and in a teacher-guided discussion, classify the examples into categories. It doesn't matter what configuration they ultimately derive. What matters is that students engage with the complexity of the subject. High school students, on the other hand, might work with a challenging text, perhaps Plato's famous dialogue on love, *The Symposium*. Here they would encounter the Greek definitions of the three basic love types: *eros*, relating largely to desire and the urge for fusion, *philia*, that connotes fraternal companionship, and *agape*, a wider love of compassion and generous desire for the betterment of others espoused by most of the world's spiritual traditions.

My own improvisational entry into an instructional discourse on love came at the beginning of a unit I tried out in my San Francisco high school psychology class. Twenty-two students and I sat in a circle for a Socratic seminar on the question "What is intimacy?" The week before I had proposed we deviate from the traditional and somewhat clinical textbook unit on emotion and instead do a unit specifically on love. Certain girls got demonstrably excited (maybe a chance to share publicly what was spoken of only in hushed conversations and leather-bound journals) while others, especially the boys, seemed impassive or slightly unsteady. This is good, I thought. Successful education should subvert the status quo. I made it clear at the outset it would be serious, no spending our time sitting around reading Mariah Carey lyrics or strategizing how to get a date.

The seminar on our outré question proved to be a profound opening to the curricular unit. Over many years of teaching I have found that when posing the right well-timed question that touches a personal chord and combining it with skillful facilitation, a discussion with everyday high school kids can magically ascend at moments to the level of an Ivy League seminar. These kids deftly wove in proto-literary references to U2 and *Twilight* and offered questions that gradually expanded the philosophical depth.

In one particularly illuminating exchange we got onto the sub-question, "Can you be intimate with a stranger?" My students were initially thinking about this in a sexual light, but I asked them if there might be another way to come at it. I was conscious of the pronouncement in Leviticus to honor (and thereby to love) the stranger. Somebody then asked whether it would be intimacy if your car breaks down on a long stretch of highway in Nevada where no one else is around and a guy stops to help you and you both get your hands dirty and then he stays with you while you wait for the tow truck and while waiting you both somehow get to talking about

the joy you share with your dogs. It seemed almost everyone had something to say about this story. We also talked about self-intimacy (which provoked scattered laughter), how maybe curling up alone in a ball with a doll after a fight with a friend or standing in the rain in July under an open sky tasting the drops were something like love. The next day one of those enthusiastic girls came up to me and confided she felt freer. She always thought intimacy meant sex. Now she knew it could be so much more. I wondered to myself, when did I finally learn that? Some people never do. We were going in the right direction.

A study of love doesn't have to be this freewheeling. In fact, there already exists a curriculum on love that is hardly avant-garde. It's the psychology and pastoral counseling programs at universities and some religious training institutions. While they may not often invoke the actual word love, they do analyze theories of love relationships. Clinical classes teach students to help others in navigating love relationships, usually romantic and familial. Seminaries and other clerical training centers for pastoral work explore similar territory while usually adding a spiritual dimension.

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Students in K–12 generally aren't exposed to psychology, but I think even young children are ready for authentic psychological study. For example, they could learn about the parts of the brain that light up (on a PET scan) when someone gets a hug. They could learn about the seminal research study showing baby monkeys developed greater attachment to a wire mesh mother figure covered by terry cloth than an equivalent wire mother holding a bottle of milk. These students could explore the implications of an experiment that suggests physical affection is more important than nourishment in inducing bonding. I don't think it's unreasonable to suggest that fifth graders can do cross-cultural anthropology, which is what they would be doing if they compared patterns of how mothers sleep with their babies across cultures worldwide.

Love clearly doesn't have to be a soft, amorphous topic of study. It can be explored under the lens of science. I had my students study empirical data and theory as well as do field research. I had them, for example, collect data through a survey asking groups of different ages to define love and then analyze the results developmentally. How do middle-age adults define love compared to middle school children and what are the resulting implications? This was a study in

research methods and data analysis as much as it was a query on love. Students can look at love through the biological lens as well. What is the chemical composition of oxytocin and where is it secreted? What happens if you compare the brain activity of a person kissing to one of that same person only fantasizing about the act?

We may not realize it, but students are already studying love all the time through literature, from Homer to Toni Morrison. We can challenge students to look deeply. Instead of relying on the emotionally stereotypical *Romeo and Juliet* in high school as the Shakespearian prototype of love, explore *Othello*. Can a man that frenzied by jealousy be said to love? The question is echoed by a contemporary Raymond Carver short story “What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” (portrayed recently in the film *Birdman*) in which a man kills himself over a lost love. Goethe wrote about suicide over love a few centuries earlier in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In recent years, Toni Morrison depicts a more extreme moment when, in *Beloved*, Sethe murders her own daughter to save her from the slave catchers. Is love compatible with annihilation? Such a question provides another sobering angle into the topic.

Students at any age could use literature to return to the root question “What is love?” Second graders might read stories such as fairy tales through the lens of that question. Everybody in education talks these days about critical thinking. I can’t think of a more critical question for second graders to engage than “Did the prince really love Cinderella?” They teach that in undergraduate literature classes, how to read against the text.

Upper elementary and middle school students could also read stories at their respective levels which have themes of love. So many books contain these themes, but teachers rarely bring them into the open. A classic story, readable by middle school kids as well as soft-hearted adults is *The Little Prince*, in which the young prince falls in love with a narcissistic rose. In considering her self-involved and mendacious behavior, the question again appears, is this really love?

History offers a different lens, a chance to understand how the experience and practices of love have evolved over time. In those hefty high school courses on Western civilization, within the traditional broad-scoped material on political power, geography and the arts, there could be a honing in to a study of something like courtship practices through the centuries. Or standard topics like feudalism could be reframed. How is the relationship between a knight and his vassal a form of filial love? If a teacher doesn’t want to deviate into such material, students might have the opportunity to do so through their research papers. The topics are hardly trivial. They are microcosms of human experience that illuminate larger historical patterns.

These kinds of academic studies through psychology, biology, literature, and history might seem misguided to some

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parents and educators, but probably not controversial. What might provoke resistance, however, is if we began to consider a curriculum that actually aims to help students examine love in a personal way. What if we asked that sophomore reading *Othello* to go beyond evaluating Othello’s feelings, turn the lens in on himself and reflect, perhaps in a private journal, whether jealousy ever impinges on his close relationships? This is a potentially explosive proposal. It involves opening the realm of the private. Concerned parents might call it unwarranted intrusion. In this country we do not constitutionally mandate a separation of emotion and state, but many people would say that to ask students to inwardly explore love and other emotions, is akin to asking them to explore their religious beliefs. A large philosophical question emerges about what aspects of the human experience should school learning touch and where boundaries should be drawn between public and private.

There is precedent for exploring emotions in a school context going back to the 1970s with the introduction of affective curriculum. This has been a step in the right direction, though limited because it tends to work within the traditional self-improvement paradigm where learning to listen empathically is treated dispassionately as a skill we might include in the Common Core, like understanding fractions or writing topic sentences.

Nonetheless many schools, particularly at the elementary level, have helped their students learn to cope with emotions such as anger, sadness, and love. The average parent would probably not raise an eyebrow hearing that her second grade son read Dr. Seuss’s *My Many Colored Days* and then was asked to free draw one color mood. Often, discussion of emotion is framed in the context of relationships. If you are in a fight with your sister and getting angry, what can you do to work with your anger? Sadly, we tend to see such curriculum fade by high school. We teach little kids to be kind, develop empathy skills, and raise their self-esteem. It’s okay in a discussion on global warming to say you love Mother Earth or draw a picture of Mommy and Daddy holding hands. But in our culture there is a belief that somehow by the time you reach about age 15, education should be an exclusively intellectual experience. I have always thought

that high schools have a lot to learn or relearn from elementary schools.

Perhaps a natural concluding step for a thorough inquiry into the complex nature of love is to extend from the interpersonal to the collective. How does love manifest in connection beyond our immediate sphere, even to humanity or the universe itself? If love involves the desire for the well-being of others then discussions of love on the collective level inevitably lead to the political because in the real world we can only achieve social well-being within a political system that supports us. Or, as Cornel West asserts “justice is what love looks like in public.” To frame love in a political context is for most students to rethink their understanding of what the word means. To personalize this political understanding of love students might study the biographies of leaders who have embodied it, such as Gandhi, Mandela, or the Dalai Lama, or perhaps more low-key examples when they can be made accessible.

One particularly powerful example of love on the political level I encourage students on any grade level to study is the South African truth and reconciliation process. While the reality of what has actually transpired there falls short of the ideals, in South Africa perpetrators of torture and their victims have made themselves vulnerable enough to speak the open truth of their experience in each other’s presence. This act itself is hardly love on the interpersonal level, but it is perhaps the greatest attempt by any nation in history to collectively love itself.

Perhaps the ultimate love challenge is to extend toward the one who naturally provokes feelings antithetical to love, anxiety, and alienation. Can we reach out to the stranger? To do so is an act of great empathy and empathy is the seed of love.

It does not take a sophisticated curriculum for a school age student to investigate empathy across a line of unfamiliarity. A fourth grade girl can sit across from a boy and share about what it is like to be a girl while he listens in silence. Then they can trade places. Or students might write monologues in the voice of a character that repels them, maybe a comic book or literary villain. To listen deeply to the stranger is to study love well. We can then even turn toward the stranger in ourselves, our disowned or shadowed sides that can be reclaimed. In this way the study of love comes full circle, from the broadest scope of global collective healing back to one person’s own inner quest for compassion.

Suffusing the study of love into our curriculum can help heal in an engaging way the traditional educational split between inner and outer, academic and personal. As we position ourselves along the deep boundary of the human experience, we must move into the larger enterprise of transforming what we have learned in an inspiring seminar into the daily practice of our schools and out into the vibrations of the larger world. On a concrete level we must begin the long term project of training loving teachers and administrators, designing expressive school physical spaces, reconfiguring our currently rigid schedules governed by hourly bells, and learning to engage in more generative ways with the ubiquitous technologies and media inside the schoolhouse walls. Realizing that goal means redirecting education beyond beautiful course outlines toward a collective caring whose presence can be felt everywhere within a school. So anytime one of our children, with a backpack of books and a curious mind walks to school in the morning, she knows she’s coming home. ■