"Love" – A Ray of Light in the Dungeon

by a fully-liberated writer who wishes to remain anonymous

I found myself desiring and knowing less and less, until I could say in utter astonishment:
"I know nothing, I want nothing."
Earlier I was sure of so many things, now I am sure of nothing.
But I feel I have lost nothing by not knowing, because all my knowledge was false.
My not knowing was in itself knowledge of the fact that all my knowledge is ignorance,
that "I do not know" is the only true statement the mind can make.
I do not claim to know what you do not.
In fact, I know much less than you do.

– Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj

"Why do you always have to be so negative?" asks a frowny young man sitting on a backrest in the front row. *"There's no reason we can't all get along and live lives of harmony and compassion. I mean, isn't that the point of spirituality? So we can live in peace and tolerance and love?"*

If this were a game of beach volleyball and he set me up like that, I'd reward him with a smash that would make his ancestors wobble, but this question isn't from a fierce competitor, it's from a delicate little New Age snowflake who has been tricked into being here because he thinks I'm a spiritual teacher. He's like a baby dolphin that has been caught in a shark net. All I want is to untangle him and send him on his way, but the setup is too good to pass up.

"I'm not positive or negative," I reply, *"I'm actually neutral, so from the perspective of false positivity, I appear negative. If you're hosting a little tea party for Lord Lion and Lady Gazelle and someone comes along who doesn't share your fantasy narrative, then the problem isn't that they're negative but that your make believe world is a bit fragile."*

That's about as gently as I can return the ball, which, to my surprise, he deftly returns. He has a well-worn, dog-eared book in his hand. I recognize it, having owned a few copies over the years, as *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. He opens to a bookmarked page and reads forcefully, as if warding off a demon:

> *" … for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love."*

He closes the book and stares at me triumphantly.

"This guy was in Auschwitz," he says. *"He created the school of Logotherapy. He's hardly hosting tea parties."*

Tricky little dolphin. Now he's got me arguing with a Holocaust survivor by proxy.

"Okay," I say, *"I agree."*

He looks at me like I'm setting him up.

"But?"

"I agree that love is the highest goal to which humanity can aspire," I say, *"but, simply put, I don't agree that you're a human. You're saying love is the best thing in the dungeon, other people say other things, but I say, why stay in the dungeon at all? Why try to make the best of a bad situation? The door's not locked, you're free to leave, so what's the point of sitting in the dark worshipping a stray shaft of light when you can walk out into the sun? Dr. Frankl might not have had that option, but maybe you do."*

He starts to answer, waving the book at me, but I know the book. I know Dr. Frankl and Logotherapy. I would clear off an entire shelf of dusty philosophy and saccharine spirituality to make room for the book this young man is trying to bludgeon me with.

"Thank you for the question," I tell him. *"You have done very well to get to Dr. Frankl, but don't stop there. Use him as a stepping stone to go further."*

He nods and thanks me.

I have been asked what it is that makes me different. I don't glow or levitate or radiate benevolence, so it's a reasonable question. The answer has two parts. The first part is that I'm not one of you. That's accurate but not helpful. The second and more important part is that you're not one of you either. You're clinging to a false idea of yourself and only you can change it. The reality is that the only one who cares about you is you.

That may sound cruel, but it's true, and truth leads to adulthood and liberation. Love, as we know it, is just a cheap knockoff of the real thing. It's always selfish because it's always a manifestation of fear. Just as your love for others is false and conditional, so is theirs for you. What seems like a genuine connection is more like actors playing Romeo and Juliet who are stupidly in love on stage, but go their separate ways when the curtain comes down. We're all in it alone and even the deepest love is just a kind of Stockholm Syndrome brought on by environment and circumstances, like prisoners in a dungeon huddling together against the cold and damp.

Once we find our way out of the dungeon and into the warmth of the sun, the huddling urge is gone and the people we were so close to no longer serve a purpose. To say that darkness is better than sunlight is fear at work. We're choosing the pain-reliever over the cure because we believe the dungeon is reality and there's nothing beyond. We'd rather live in spiritual squalor than take a risk. Within the dungeon, this love-huddling seems like salvation, but from the perspective of someone living in the warmth of the sun, it looks like sightless white eels writhing in a cave puddle. We can shape ourselves to each ocher, become emotionally entangled in each other, intermingle our thoughts and feelings and fluids, but there can never be an authentic connection, only the profound desire to connect which is generated by fear of the black hole within, which is – ironically, paradoxically, counter-intuitively – the door that leads out of the cave and into freedom.

I can read the room well enough to know that this is not a popular message, but it's not meant to be. A lot of these people hang their spiritual hat on the whole love thing, which is exactly why I'm kicking it around. What is this love that we love so much? The love of one ego for another? Of one false self for another? My avatar loves your avatar? My lie loves your lie? Is it a person we love or love itself? We're all trapped in a Freudian-Oedipal, mommy-daddy stage of emotional development because we're trapped in the juvenile state. There is a truth of love, and I'm a big fan of the real thing, but the real thing is an adult thing and we'll never discover it as long as we settle for the kiddie version.

“If you think that spiritual development means an expansion of love, then you're putting all your eggs in the wrong basket; facing outward when the real journey is inward. It's like a child who thinks that being a grownup means you get to have lots of candy and play all day and never eat broccoli. That's what a perfect life looks like to a kid, just the way love and bliss and life everlasting might look to one kind of grownup, or wealth and power to another, or junk food and a game console to another, but adulthood is none of these things and by clinging to adolescent expectations we anchor ourselves to the juvenile state. By trying to make the best of the dungeon, we abandon any hope of escape. All the preconditions we put on adulthood will act like emotional deadweight that will either be painfully severed in the transition to adulthood, or block it altogether.

“All the teachers, priests and gurus in the spiritual marketplace are peddling their visions of the future and we shop for the best deal; the least sacrifice now for the most heaven later. The spiritual marketplace is a very large carnival full of very sincere people selling lovely visions of our potential, even delivering in some cases to some degree, but what no one in the carnival is selling is a shitty deal. No one is offering a path to meaninglessness and futility and the oblivion of no-self. That's my little niche and I can maintain it because I'm not actually *in* the spiritual marketplace, I'm out back with the dumpsters and the portable toilets and all the weird smells. People stumble out to puke up all the sugary crap they've been stuffing themselves with, sick from broken promises and dead-end paths, and they find me in the back alley wearing a dark overcoat with my hat pulled down, offering a different kind of vision. I have a very simple story to tell and, as they say of *The Mahabharata,* if you listen closely, when it's over, you'll be someone else.

“What you find when you stumble out the back gate into the dark alley is that the carnival is just a tiny island of light surrounded by a deep, dark forest. You want to go back into the light, but I'm pointing into the dark. That's where you'll find what you were looking for all along. In a dungeon, everyone will gather around whatever thin spear of light might pierce the darkness, but that spear of light isn't a destination, it's an invitation, the promise of a fully illuminated reality of which the benighted mind cannot conceive.

“The path into the woods is the eye of the needle through which ego cannot pass. It's on that dark path that you will be set upon by demons ripping you to shreds who you will come to regard as angels tearing away your bonds. Every step in those dark woods is marked by the loss of something you thought could never be lost. Whatever you bring will be torn from you and the degree to which you resist is the degree to which you suffer. You may think you know what's on the other side of those woods based on what some priest or guru or some guy in a dark alley told you, but you don't even know if there *is* a beyond. For all you know, you might walk into that forest and disappear, but maybe you've reached a point where anything is better than going back into that carnival of sweet lies, so you listen to your Little Bastard and do a trustfall into the void.

“Or maybe not. Maybe you haven't reached that point. Maybe you just walked through the wrong gate. Maybe you just wipe the vomit off your chin and head back for another round of spiritual tail-chasing and water-treading and time-wasting, which is the exact purpose of the spiritual marketplace and a straight-up victory for ego, but right now you're not in the spiritual marketplace, you're in the back alley with a shadowy figure who's telling you what deep inside you already know; that what you've been looking for is not in the gaudy light but in the gloomy dark. That's what's happening here tonight. We're standing between two worlds; the bright shiny carnival you came out of and the dark scary forest I'm pointing to. One looks like life

and happiness and the other looks like death and despair, but look again; which is really which? Ask your Little [inner-] Bastard. That's the only guru you'll ever need, but right now he's smothered beneath your squirming emotional mass. As long as he can't make himself heard, you'll always head back into the madhouse, but when he starts getting his way, the real spiritual journey can begin."

We take a ten-minute break. I grab a bottle of water and go outside. I walk briskly away for five minutes and then turn back. As I return, I see that many of the cars in the parking area have a bumper sticker on which the word coexist is spelled out in religious symbols.

Though warm, I shiver.

"In a long process of cutting away emotional deadweight," I continue, "the first thing to go is the illusion of connection to your herdmates. Then, once you're selfborn out of the herd and into the adult state, your real life begins. You won't send postcards home because everywhere is now home. You won't be keeping friends and family apprised of your progress because they're not really friends and family anymore, just people you huddled with in bad times. You believe your bonds to these people are real and can never be broken, but they're not and they can. The parents of the halfborn child are not the parents of the fullborn adult. The adult is an entirely different order of being, like caterpillar and butterfly. New relationships may form, but not like they were because they will not be based on need and fear.

"I was just out in the parking lot and I saw coexist bumper stickers on a lot of the cars. That's just more Lord Lion and Lady Gazelle tea party fantasy. You know what happens when gazelles sit down to tea with lions? They get killed and eaten. That's not a system error, that's how it's supposed to be, but if you ask a gazelle, they'll tell you it's a very bad system because they're judging from a low-level perspective. Those bumper stickers are spelled out with the iconography of major religions and belief systems, some of which seek to consume or eradicate the others, and none of which are concerned with truth. They symbolize the tyranny of delusion, why pretend otherwise? Why pretend at all?

"Futility, meaninglessness, and impermanence are the facts of life, but it doesn't end there, that's just the sign over the entrance. Why do so few awaken in or from the dreamstate? Why can no one find the only thing that can never be lost? Fear, always fear, and all your spirituality is really just burying your head in the sand because you're afraid of your own life. Everyone prefers sham spirituality with all its pretty lies and sweet people, like living in a day spa, but real spirituality is not pretty and sweet, it's scary and it ruins your nice little life, but when the transition to adulthood is complete you'll be free to learn and develop and understand what you really are and what this place really is. The futility, meaninglessness, and impermanence will still be there, but they were never really the problem in the first place; denying them was."

I flash them a peace sign but with three fingers. "Make war, not love. Good night"

It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.

– J. Krishnamurti