

In The Pursuit of Love, Then and Now

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Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud... (The Holy Bible, 1986). The condition of love and all its romantic imaginings, a normative narrative for life being complete, we all desire love. Let us focus on the genesis of love, defined by its beginning, the meeting, and the unlimited possibilities. Looking through the lens of the me and I to regard individualisation in the pursuit of love. Discovering the generational difference and sameness between a girl born in the 1970s, me; and a girl born in the 1990s, her, my daughter. Investigating the role of reflexivity, symbolic interactionism and Cooley's looking glass self with specific examples about love. Looking at Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'Liquid Love' in relation to freedom and love. Discovering the intersection between agency and society and where truth and love reside in post modernity.

The year was 1989. I had just been deposited at a religious youth camp, a worse way to spend the weekend impossible to conceive. I felt despondent about life and frustrated by my complete lack of agency. But this was to be the weekend I met my love. Giddens explanation for reflexivity played a role in my presence at this weekend, organised religion being an important part of my family life and the main social group to which we belonged (Willis, 2011). The circular nature of this arrangement followed many generations, my parents and grandparents having met through religion.

'Across time' in the year 2015 my daughter sat at home on her computer all weekend having refused to come away on a family camping trip (no Wi-fi) in favour of online dating, it appeared she had complete agency over her life, or did she? The perception of truth and freedom being central to the story, we shall return to that later. Margaret Archer's account of modern reflexivity portrays the actions of my daughter as a reaction, not simply a circular movement that just keeps repeating over generations. Archer would surmise that my daughter is on the computer attempting to meet someone because the routine forms of meeting have failed (Caetano, 2014). One could speculate this is in part due to the breakdown of structures such as the church.

I've always been fascinated by the I and me, the individual response to others and the social control we impose on ourselves. There exists a sameness between her and I that bridges the bounds of time, we both presented an edited version of ourselves to the world in the pursuit of love. A version that was tempered by our perceived notion of freedom. The dichotomy of truth being at the forefront of individualisation. We live in an era where agency is dominant; and for her, the right to shape her own identity an entitlement. One that comes with great responsibility.

She joins 4.5 million Australians who use online dating as a routine method for meeting someone (— Relationships Australia, 2019). Therefore, the identity she has curated for herself is paramount in the quest for love. There is a lot of information about her included in her profile, from the basics of physicality to profession, likes, dislikes, wants, needs, hobbies and habits. There exists the idea for many that this is very truthful. I find this point of view simplistic and believe we are regarding only the 'me' of Mead's symbolic interactionist theory (Mead, 1967). There exists disregard for the mind, the self and I. Although it is likely for the I to be revealed once further communication takes place. There is a high level of control being exerted to contain people's perception and we have arrived at a new social understanding of reality.

Travelling back in time to the religious camp, I recall my mothers' words. "You can smile; but do not laugh, you may make the boys feel uncomfortable. You have nice teeth but a loud laugh." Here we witness the four pillars of Mead's theory of identity, self, me, I and mind (Mead, 1967). The 'self' conducted an internal dialogue and decided that my Mothers advice was completely stupid, although the 'me' would maintain an awareness around not laughing too loudly, subject to the 'I' being able to contain a boisterous personality. And so, you see the dichotomy in truth. The boys on the religion camp knew very few facts yet they had seen the real me. Whilst I had made some effort to contain my personality and control my identity the reality is that meeting in person is a multi-sensorial experience and a lot more is revealed.

So where does this lead us in the pursuit of love. My daughters time is spent mostly swiping left; absorbing information that will promote or disqualify someone's worthiness. There is an absence of feeling, the driving force being practical. "Technology penetrates to the core of human experience, turning people's emotional exchanges into units of information" (Elliott and Lemert, 2009). There now exists a new sanitised reality; void of meaning.

She is looking for someone the same as her and seeking a homogenised solution to her loneliness. The narrative of online dating aligns perfectly with old fashioned arranged marriages. Class, education and sameness determining the match. Whilst marriage is not necessarily the end goal for online dating; a relationship is often desired. I find this ironic in the current era of unprecedented agency facilitated by globalisation, the free flow of information in a vast digital world. Why are we returning to narrow constructs for forming

a relationship? Perhaps we are craving structure and certainty in a world that seems unpredictable and scary.

When one is online in the pursuit of love it is not a sensory experience but more a deductive and intellectual exercise. These behaviours could be regarded as a form of rationalism. When people engage in this mode of decision making they base their actions on what they perceive to be the most effective means to achieve their goal (Wallace and Wolf, 1999). Rationalised love becomes a commodity through which to facilitate a harmonious life devoid of economic differences. It is a very old-fashioned idea that sees us returning to 17th century pragmatism. At this time matches were made based on materiality being a function of class. The French philosopher Rene Descartes believed that the rational pursuit of truth required us to doubt every belief about sensory reality (Frogel, 2016). We have progressed so far along a spectrum of reasoning and rationality that we have forgotten what it is to feel. It is like the meaning of truth has changed. Our ability to think has regressed and we now require the truth to be visible, tangible and measurable. For me, love is a feeling, it's completely irrational.

When I talk to my daughter about love being an irrational feeling there is confusion and disagreement. My daughter insists that this feeling is desire and that love is about endurance and is accompanied by a deep understanding of acceptance. She couches acceptance in terms of it being compromise, proposing that the shared experience of life reduces one's freedom. For these reasons she reports she will be much older than I was when she commits to life with one person. I was twenty-three years old when I got married, the same age she is now. The average age of marriage for Australian women today is thirty (— Relationships Australia, 2019). I find her point of view to be sensible, but I am yet to determine if it is wise. We will only know that in the fullness of time. It has been illuminating talking with my daughter and our conversations have identified several important themes. The notion of balance between freedom and security features prominently in discussion. Also; the interconnectedness between love and desire.

Prominent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has written extensively on society in relation to both freedom and love. He sees society as existing in a liquid form, where liquid is the metaphor of rapid change and individualism dominates (Bauman, 1999). Whilst Freud recognises the conflict between freedom and security Bauman seeks to uncover how we can create a liveable balance between the two. He continually returns to an ever-present anxiety pervading the behaviour for those whom he names 'liquid moderns', people born into an era of technology. He explains their constant need to be connected to devices as a way for them to feel a sense of belonging; but he states this doesn't work as they have become lost in the act of communicating and not in the meaning of that message.

He regards 'liquid moderns' as treating love like a commodity and is concerned that they want love to yield like everything else does. He speculates that this group want to have freedom and security simultaneously which is why we observe them frenetically communicating and then disconnecting just as easily. An example being the ability to quickly end a relationship online with little emotion. My daughter was relieved when a relationship was ended online. She was thankful there was no difficult conversation. I found this strange as I would have considered such an act to be cowardly, but she said it was less painful and less confronting. She explained that it is easier for everyone as there is no investment of time, no need to settle someone who is emotionally distressed or crying if you are not interested in them. I could understand the practicality of this but at the same time I found it slightly shocking for people to be so devoid of empathy. Bauman sees the individual's autonomy as being the new power and the only hope being the individual consciousness. That the individual may one day gain some insight into these behaviours and recognise them as deficient in some way. Bauman does not think these behaviours can be influenced institutionally and portrays his role in society as being an observer of reality. A reality that he sees as being immune to traditional power bases and instruments of change.

Bauman has a famous quote on love and desire. "Desire and love act at cross purposes. Love is a net cast on eternity, desire is a stratagem to be spared the chores of net weaving. True to their nature love would strive to perpetuate the desire. Desire on the other hand would shun loves shackles" (Bauman, 2003). Bauman was married twice, he was widowed after sixty-one years of marriage and then died in the second year of his subsequent marriage. I imagine this gives him implicit authority to make such a statement about love and desire.

When I reported love is irrational with such confidence it is because I truly believe it cannot be dislodged. It is impossible to use rational thought and reasoning to overthrow love and I agree it is a 'net cast on eternity'. The second part of the quote holds more complexity than the first half of the quote. The meaning is to explain that desire is a quick emotion that requires little work to nurture. Bauman implies 'liquid moderns' give precedence to desire as it is immediately gratifying and all about freedom and autonomy whereas love is about responsibility. This is interesting as both love and desire are very strong emotions. The difference being one can dislodge desire for another person with rational and reasoning when confronted by temptation. It is a matter of whether the individual chooses to do so in these postmodern liquid times. Does the 'liquid modern' believe it is possible for love and desire to cohabitate?

Once more we return to the theme of agency and whether to remain in a loving relationship or give in to the desire that is everywhere. Desire surrounds us in the postmodern world and there is an abundance of everything, materiality, beauty and

experiences await us. I find desire to be very powerful and believe love and desire are inseparable, not at cross purposes. Enduring relationships require both. I can't imagine a life without the passion that desire represents. It would be boring.

My daughter speculates that enduring love can perpetuate without desire. I find confusion reigns on this topic. Perhaps this is because as people we each have differing needs. Bauman implies 'liquid moderns' are deeply bereft of understanding in regard to freedom and love. He portrays 'liquid moderns' as a group who are drinking from a poison chalice. The only way to save themselves is to stop drinking as there is no ultimate power coming to rescue anyone in this era of individual agency.

My memory taking me back in time. I am laughing. I am laughing way too much. I have met a boy who appears to be an idiot. It will take me years to reset his conservative values. I definitely would have swiped left if I met him online. But I can't draw myself away from the ever-widening black pools in his blue eyes as we stare at each other with desire. Fowler explains love can be analysed through the perspective of Cooley's 'looking glass self' (Fowler, 2007). This is via the imagination and how our appearance is seen, how others judge our appearance and the feeling one has in regard to that. It is only applicable in theory when regarding required love, and usually involves emotional or physical expression of affection. I could imagine that 'my love' was very interested as he judged me favourably and this gave me security in regard to that judgement, it confirmed my identity.

My daughter has had a few dates and two relationships through online dating. She has enjoyed the company of those whom she has met in person. It would not surprise me if she did eventually find 'the one' online.

In ending perhaps, it is important to note the sameness. The same struggles we each faced on the journey of individualisation in the pursuit of love. We each battled with the version of ourselves we presented and how others would perceive us. We each wanted to avoid loneliness and experience love. We each thought about the truth and had an awareness of freedom. And we were each subject to the pendulum that swings between structure and agency in the society of our time. Neither being intrinsically good or bad; just different.

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