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“The Love Drug”

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Ah, Valentine’s Day.

I imagine last night that some of you were greeted by a loved one or spouse with chocolates, a dozen roses, a fancy dinner out, or maybe just shared a quiet night in front of the TV at home. Cupid strikes his proverbial arrow into the hearts of lovers and all is well, right?

For others, the day is filled with dread and sorrow. This “Hallmark Holiday” as my own husband Tom calls it, exacerbates single people’s awareness, which for some may not be by choice. My heart goes out to those who lost a spouse or partner to illness or accident, to those struggling to rebuild life after a painful divorce, and those who just feel desperate and alone – who feel there must be no “soul mate” out there for them – at least not within reach, not at this time or place.

But the subject of Valentine’s Day brings me to other musings of the heart...

I believe many of us are addicted to what I call the “love drug.”

The “love drug?” You know, that certain “sparkle” (as my divorced Italian girlfriend Elisabetta calls it) – that magic in the chemistry of a new romantic interest... the physical and emotional response this person’s mere presence elicits... We feel our best selves when we are around these people. We want to impress them, and we may actually do things better as a consequence.

There is eager anticipation before every encounter, a joy in each and every communication, the “butterflies in our tummies” as we see them first come into view. They occupy our thoughts when we aren’t together, and in some cases we become CONSUMED by images, communications, and memories of them.

For me, the love drug was particularly intense during the early part of my relationship with my husband of 14 years. Not at first, interestingly enough... our interactions were slow to heat up... it simmered below my radar until one day I did catch myself exhibiting the symptoms of someone a little “lovesick” --- and once we were both aware of the other’s interest and able to mutually demonstrate our admiration, the full dose of “love drug” kicked in and sustained me through months of dating, an engagement, and the pinnacle of the arc – our glorious wedding day.

And then, years later, reality set in. Life together as a married couple meant things were so much less “sparkly.” His decisions and opinions and perspectives were now in painfully stark contrast to my own. (How did I miss this when we were courting??) Gone were the rose-colored glasses where we could forgive a little mistake here, or turn away from a minor annoyance there... as time went on, every seemingly insignificant action heaped onto the pile of resentment building in me – and him – and I suspect so many of us...

And I return to my thoughts of the “love drug”... WHY did I fall for this fool’s paradise? Does it all come down to procreation??? Are we no different than bacteria – seeking desperately to propagate the species? It sure is an elaborate trap – nature has gone to great lengths to ensure that males and females are drawn to each other to extend humanity into future generations... And how then do we explain the myriad sexual attractions that DON’T lead to fertilization? Hmmm, that’s a subject for another day.

I am particularly intrigued by the “love drug” - and I enjoy my own and others’ ruminations on the subject through the pen, in the writing of poetry – through the instrument, in the expression of music – and through the body, in the expression of dance... What greater inspiration could there be for the arts??

And as I said earlier, my personal love drug was very slow to take effect with Tom. But that’s what made it so convincing. It wasn’t a flash in the pan with the inevitable burnout that follows. It was sustainable because it grew slowly with the proper nurturing and care.

Back in my mid-twenties, in my early professional years, I was pining for a long-term monogamous relationship. I wanted to find a man whom I could one day see marrying. It seemed I was attracted to and/or attracting the wrong type of man. The men I was dating only wanted immediate gratification... one archetype in particular was the guy who tried to woo me with fresh cut flowers... Each week, usually by Monday or Tuesday, the florist would drop off another pretty bouquet to my office – the trouble was, each time, the flowers outlived the relationship itself.

This literally happened on numerous occasions. It was rather embarrassing.

Finally, seeing this pattern prompted my sage, older Korean colleague and close friend Helen Koo - who was already married with children – to share this advice with me: “Danielle. You must stop wasting time on men who give you fresh-cut flowers, for they wilt too soon. You need to find a man with whom you can plant and grow a garden.”

It was such a powerful metaphor.

And when I began dating Tom, I remembered her words. Tom was not the type of man to send me a bouquet of store-bought fresh-cut flowers for holidays or even random romantic gestures. But one of the first things we did together in the yard of the first house we bought together was – build a raised bed and plant a garden. It was the first of many. Oh, he goes around with clippers and brings bouquets of fresh cuttings inside on occasion, but they are the flowers out of the perennial beds we raised, planted, weeded, and trimmed together. Where one is cut, many thrive.

And the metaphor continues... We grew a family together! We created a beautiful family. I feel it's my greatest accomplishment in life! And while I do sometimes desperately miss that feeling of the “love drug” – while the euphoria of “new love” is gone, there is something more powerful at play.

As I pour my love into my children, their adoration and appreciation is enough to sustain me.

The love I crave has evolved right along with my life's situation. What began as young, carefree carnal love evolved into intensely passionate relationship love, then expanded to familial love. And now I realize the strength of love given to and received by my spiritual community. All along, there has been a progression of acceptance and understanding.

I imagine whether or not my marriage survives these difficult years, my next step in the evolution of love will be an even heavier reliance on community love. I hope to grow old together with the men, women, and children of my Unitarian Universalist family.

My heart expanded with the addition of each of my own children, as it will with future grandchildren, and every caring soul that worships together with me here, in this sacred space.

I hope that regardless of where you are in the journey of love and relationship – high on the “love drug” or long past the diminished effect, that you also recognize the sustaining love of this spiritual community and take comfort in its warmth and support.