

CHAPTER 2

The romantic myths we live by

One of the most unfortunate ways in which we have lost contact with our real feelings and needs results from the effects of unrealistic cultural myths and images regarding romantic love. Romantic images portrayed in popular fairy tales, songs, stories, plays, movies, and advertisements, fill our minds and hearts with compelling ideas and unreal expectations regarding love.

Beginning with our impressionable pre-school years, we are exposed to a series of enchanting fairy tales about wondrous characters such as Cinderella and Prince Charming. Then, as we become adolescents thirsting for knowledge and understanding, the media exposes us to additional romantic scenarios that provide unrealistic models for what to expect and how to develop an intimate relationship. This input leaves us with strong psychological imprints regarding future possibilities that we then desire and search for. Imprinted with a fixed set of anticipations regarding the kind of magical person who we expect will bring us abundant love and unending happiness, we learn to compare each man or woman we meet with an idealized image of the kind of mate we want – someone who will passionately sweep us off our feet and with whom we will live happily ever after.

Observed signs that match our conditioned images include physical features such as height, physique, hair style, manner of dress, social status, and capacity to care for us financially. We may also be attracted to those who treat us in the polite, courteous manner afforded a prince or princess despite how they may really feel toward us.

Upon meeting one who resembles these deeply internalized images of a hoped-for mate, we may experience a sense of

'falling in love.' This occurs, in part, as a result of the close interplay between powerful emotional and physiological energies and our culturally worshipped images and beliefs. An exciting rush of passions may then suddenly pour forth in relation to one who fits our desired image.

Falsely believing that the path to love and fulfillment lies in the actualization of our romantic quest, we look for one who corresponds to our images of love, beauty, strength, or whatever attributes awaken our deeper longings. In reality, when we finally discover such a fascinating person, he or she may be elusive and hard to contact. On the surface we may be allured or captivated, but, since on a deeper level we do not really know the person, we can project all kinds of noble virtues that the individual does not really possess. We unwittingly attribute these deeper qualities to the other person when he or she fits the pictures that we falsely assume are associated with these desirable traits.

'Falling in love' with such a person, we are often intoxicated with our own romantic hopes about living happily ever after now that we have finally found someone who resembles our images. Our feelings of 'being in love' are manufactured ones insofar as they stem from our treasured images. Genuine intimacy, on the other hand, derives from authentic contact with another human being who possesses both strengths and limitations.

A woman, for example, may be looking for the charming, handsome prince whose image has been firmly ingrained in her mind. She may believe that finding this special person will guarantee her a permanent supply of love. This sought-after individual may also need to embody comforting qualities reminiscent of her 'good' father, or he may have to possess characteristics she always wanted in a father, but never had (such as a capacity to protect her). Unfortunately, such expectations (whether conscious or not) involve a surrender of her personal power and autonomy. Depending upon a man for her well-being, she may then experience little self-worth or life meaning apart from the relationship.

Men, on the other hand, may be on the lookout for their beautiful princess – a fair and tender maiden who they can protect and be loved by. This myth reflects the image of the

Prince Charming type – the ‘good boy’ or the strong macho man looking for a gentle woman who will shower him with unending love, recognition, and nurturance. Unfortunately, such a man is mostly in love with his images of love. His unwillingness to accept the woman as an autonomous and equal individual or disclose his own feelings and weaknesses reveals a fundamental lack of awareness of what it takes to develop an enduring sense of intimacy.

Soon after ‘falling in love’ in these ways, there follows an inevitable crash well known to those of us who have abruptly fallen out of love. We take a hard fall as our romantic hopes and expectations are dashed upon the rocky shores of reality. For example, a woman who is driven by the search for an idealized man may feel disappointed to observe unanticipated ‘weaknesses’ in him, such as feelings of fear or sadness. Confused or threatened by this discovery, she may reject him as insufficiently ‘strong’ to meet her needs. In a more updated idealization, a woman may want a man who is able to vulnerably share his feelings. While this is a step forward, there may still be difficulty when the man actually displays the vulnerability that she supposedly wants. For instance, if he is awkward or faltering in his self-expression, he may be rejected.

Conversely, a man may be disappointed to discover that his once-adored female companion occasionally gets angry or disagrees with him. In short, he becomes disturbed or outraged because she has a mind of her own, and a set of feelings that are different from his and, therefore, threatening to his desire to meet his needs by controlling her. A more contemporary man may view himself as being beyond such narrow idealizations; he may think he wants an independent woman. In reality, however, his conditioned sense of masculinity may continue to be threatened by a woman who actually *is* powerful and outspoken.

Becoming involved with enticing people who evoke feelings of elation or excitement rarely bears fruit when based upon romantic images that lack real grounding or substance. Intimate contact requires us to be in touch with our real feelings – those that exist prior to (or beneath) these socially conditioned myths and images. Genuine love and intimacy are often difficult to attain, in fact, because we are frequently unable to distinguish

our actual experience from secondary experience that arises out of these culturally generated imprints. Massive confusion and dissatisfaction result from this incapacity to differentiate our original feelings and needs from those learned as we were growing up.

Before we can overcome the alienating effects of these socially conditioned romantic myths that have become an integral part of our operating philosophy of life, we must first identify the nature of these myths, and notice how they have subtly influenced our way of relating to a prospective mate or present partner. By re-evaluating these romantic beliefs, we may begin to replace them with more realistic understandings that are more likely to lead to the successful relationships we want.

ONCE IN LOVE, ALWAYS IN LOVE

One popular element of romantic myths is that once we ‘fall’ in love with a person, we will be forever in love with that person. In addition, if we truly love someone, we will do anything it takes to keep the relationship intact, however abused, mistreated, or ignored we may be. ‘True love,’ in this view, amounts to symbiotically clinging to a person. Even if he or she left us long ago, we will forever await his or her return.

This unrealistic belief accounts for much of the torment experienced in relationships in which love is unreciprocated. Becoming desperately attached to a solitary source of love, we set ourselves up for considerable pain and disappointment if the other person is not inclined to respond favorably.

An unreciprocated involvement often looks ridiculous to those who can clearly see the futility of our predicament. ‘Being in love,’ however (or believing we are in love), we remain preoccupied with thoughts, feelings, and images of the other person. Such an attachment can persist even though we receive clear verbal statements, or obvious nonverbal messages (expressed through their actions) that they are unwilling or emotionally unable to be with us. Stubbornly refusing to accept the reality of another’s disinterest or lack of desire to work things through, we may continue to profess our love. We may also deceive ourselves with the hope that some magical change may bring

them back into our arms. Clinging to these thin strands of hope, we compromise our integrity and postpone living our lives.

Unable to sway another person, we may feel ashamed, or berate ourselves for failing. Condemning ourselves for not getting what we want, we may fall prey to a self-esteem tailspin that can negatively impact all aspects of our lives as we retreat from a world increasingly seen as hostile or dangerous.

By clinging to an unattainable person, we become an emotional captive, painfully attached to the experience of desire or longing, which we misidentify as love. We may derive gratification for maintaining this identification by perceiving ourselves as the determined heroes who will not easily give up the noble quest to remain true to the one we love; such tales of unrequited love are glamorized in literature and contemporary movies.

Exclusively depending upon one other individual for our sense of self-esteem and personhood, we become an emotional hostage to that person. Having unwisely opted to surrender to this individual before a realistic sense of trust has had time gradually to develop in the natural give and take of relating to one another, we suddenly find ourselves at the mercy of his or her whims and preferences. Our position is one of helplessness resulting from the powerful effects of unrealistic romantic myths coupled with the poverty of inner resources to effectively care for ourselves.

Letting go of our romantic attachments is often difficult because such images are infused with powerful emotional energies and propensities for loving that we innately possess. These tendencies of our organism, however, exist prior to our learned myths and images. As we discern and become familiar with our innate capacities, we can begin to create genuinely loving and intimate relationships based upon a more fundamental dimension of our humanness. First, however, we must be willing to bravely face reality and grieve the loss of someone we cannot have, as well as relinquish our naïve romantic notions.

The myths and fairy tales that are familiar to all cultures contain elements of our deepest longings and aspirations; they point toward possibilities of the human spirit. But they become harmful when they distort reality or degenerate into overly idealized and simplistic beliefs that remove us from our actual experience of life.

THERE IS ONLY ONE PERSON I CAN DEEPLY LOVE IN MY LIFETIME

Closely associated with the notion 'once in love, always in love,' is the idea that there is but one other person to love in our lives; and, once we find such a person, all our needs will be met. This magical notion manifests as the romantic search for the ideal mate – the one who will somehow relieve our sorrow, allay our loneliness, and provide ongoing nurturing and love; such an idealized person is sometimes called our 'soul mate.'

Looking for a person who matches these romantic fantasies can lead to a very long wait. Blinded by our search and expectations, we can easily overlook those who may be quite capable of giving at least some degree of love and support. Withdrawing from those around us or new people we meet because they do not correspond to our mental pictures, we might miss the very opportunity that could lead to the deeper levels of love and contact we want. As a result, we remain isolated because we fail to accept a flawed prince or princess, that is, a human being. Actually, we overlook the fact that all people, including ourselves, possess human weaknesses and limitations, and that by accepting a person inclusive of these limitations, he or she may gradually blossom into the loving, caring person we might like to be with. The 'right chemistry' between ourselves and another person may then arise in a more gradual manner as we become better acquainted with his or her depths and more deeply in touch with ourselves.

The unrealistic notion that there is only one person for us in this lifetime may return to haunt us once we think we have located such an individual. We then expect to be totally happy for the rest of our lives because we have now found the man or woman of our dreams. When this scenario does not materialize, we may become upset with our spouse for somehow causing the problem or blame ourselves for the unhappy outcome.

Exploring the cause of a faltering or failed relationship, we may be hard pressed to understand what went wrong. Unfortunately, many of us never learned the simple fact that finding a mate does not ensure happiness. A successful relationship requires considerable work, primarily regarding our own personal growth. The romantic myths we grew up with ignored

the fact that we first need to grow as autonomous individuals (at least to some reasonable degree), before we can sustain a meaningful primary commitment with another. Also, unless we become well-acquainted with ourselves – knowing our feelings and affirming our needs, and learning to communicate these in responsible ways, we will form the unwise habit of depending upon another to furnish us with well-being. Looking toward another to make us feel content or whole, we fail to be realistically responsible for our lives. Placing this heavy burden on another can eventually smother the life of a relationship or lead us to be disgusted with ourselves for relying too heavily upon another.

Believing that there is only one possible partner or source of love in our lives leaves us isolated and deprives us of the contact that is available through other friendships. In addition, if the relationship or marriage breaks up due to unresolved differences or the death of our partner, we may feel condemned to a lonely existence for our remaining years. The underlying romantic belief that may hook us here is, 'If I really loved him or her, I could never give myself to another person.' For example, in *The Thornbirds*, a popular book and television mini-series, the main character, Maggie, spent most of her life longing for a priest who was emotionally and physically unavailable to her. While his attraction to her and professed love added fuel to her own passions, he was not willing to offer the unreserved, committed kind of love that she wanted. Re-stimulated by his periodic visits, she developed an intense attachment that she was unable or unwilling to disengage from. This painful addiction led to much sorrow and isolation, embellished by the romantic notion that she loved only him and, therefore, could never consider surrendering to another man.

Caught by the power of such a compelling myth, we may irrationally imagine that we are betraying a person by loving someone else, even though the desired partner may be dead or otherwise unavailable. Actually, we would only be betraying the saccharine romantic myth that is ruthlessly controlling our lives. Until we re-evaluate the insidious myths we live by and replace them with more suitable ways of thinking and living, we will continue to be manipulated by them and thus guarantee a life of needless frustration, isolation, and heartbreak.

EXPERIENCING NEGATIVE FEELINGS MEANS I AM NO LONGER IN LOVE

One of the most destructive romantic myths is that if we truly love someone, we should never experience 'negative' feelings in relation to that person. 'Negative' feelings, that is, ones that most of us have been taught to avoid, such as anger, hurt, or fear, are viewed as bad or threatening. Experiencing or expressing such feelings is seen as indicating that something is terribly wrong with the relationship, or that our love is no longer true. The one toward whom we have such feelings may also interpret our displayed emotions as a sign that we never really loved him or her. After all, according to this belief, how can we feel angry or sad if we are 'really' in love?

This narrow-minded 'black and white' thinking imposes a heavy burden on us. Pushing aside unwanted feelings in order to salvage what we believe to be true love – that is, a love unblemished by 'lowly' emotions – is a sadly futile and counter-productive task. As unpleasant emotions arise (as they inevitably do) we may conclude that this person is not 'right' for us. Or, as a result of years of repressing unwanted emotions, the interpersonal contact may become so devoid of real feeling that divorce may seem to be the only viable option.

Being naive about the workings of human emotions and what they really mean, we may recognize no alternative other than to avoid these feelings. This can lead to unfortunate consequences in terms of our personal growth, the nurturing potential of the relationship, and even our own physical health. One woman, for instance, who complained of getting headaches and being chronically tired, stated in the course of therapy, 'I'm tired of being criticized by my husband.' Never standing up for herself, she gradually realized that her physical symptoms were related to taking in his criticism and then carrying it around inside herself with no effective outlet for her pent-up frustrations. Exploring the matter further, she realized that she was actually very angry about his criticisms and lack of support. Soon after contacting her anger, however, this emotion quickly disappeared. When asked what was happening inside, she said, 'If I let myself be angry, I feel that I'd be betraying my husband.'

Since anger, for this woman, meant a lack of faithfulness, she

quickly bypassed her anger whenever she would begin to feel it. Thinking in categories of 'right or wrong,' and 'good or bad,' she had difficulty holding the perspective that she could be angry and still love her husband. Observing her unconsciously operating beliefs about anger and love, she realized how unrealistic it was to assume that feeling angry meant that she did not love her husband. Glimpsing the ill effects of this belief for the first time, she could begin to explore the possibility of honoring her legitimate feelings of anger without the accompanying self-condemnation.

Equating negative feelings with an absence of love, we spend considerable energy protecting one another from facing potentially threatening feelings. We may withhold the truth, change the topic of conversation, or even lie in order to do what we consider to be a favor to the other person – namely, to shield him or her from those feelings that he or she was also trained to avoid. For example, we may feel angry or hurt because our sexual needs are not being met by our partner. Instead of discussing the matter, we may just grin and bear it. However, the long-term consequence of withholding our discontents is to stifle the natural flow of feelings that keep a relationship thriving. No matter how hard we may try to cover up our true emotions, they eventually leak out or burst open. We may, for instance, express our anger in passive ways, such as by being late or buying things with our shared money. Or we may seek out an affair in order to meet an essential need that is not being satisfied at home.

The romantic myths that lead us to protect others from our unpleasant feelings can never lead to the happiness we want. Feelings have a life of their own whether we like it or not. They will simply find substitute outlets – ones that can do more harm because we are often unaware of them. In addition, the practical effect of protecting others from 'negative' feelings is to insulate them from feelings themselves. The inability or unwillingness to open to painful feelings has the inevitable effect of diminishing our positive feelings as well. In other words, our ability to access feelings in general becomes blocked. Therefore, protecting others from the natural doses of hurt or pain that accompany our lives is to deprive them of enjoying the pleasure and happiness that

could come if we chose to honor and deal with all of our feelings.

In reality, love is not some sterile, remote phenomenon existing separately from our everyday lives and emotions. Instead, it is to be found in the midst of our daily lives. As we will see later, emotions such as sorrow, hurt, anger, and remorse can become a vital pathway toward a more deeply and genuinely felt love and intimacy.

Recognizing the noxious effects of alluring and seemingly innocent romantic myths can provide a sobering antidote that can begin to free us to face reality more directly and courageously. Although we may fear that this will bring a life devoid of romance, the good news is that the transition to a reality-based approach to relationships provides a needed foundation for the growth of an inspiring dimension of love and intimacy. Qualities we consider romantic – such as love, caring, excitement, joy, and wonder – can take on fresh dimensions of meaning and be cherished in a new way as we replace romantic myths with a more workable perspective that embraces our human limitations.