

Dalhousie University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Love in a Spinning World:

Love, Ethics, and Living Well with Others

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore the place of love in our lives and in our societies, suggesting that it forms a crucial part of good human conduct by urging us to demonstrate responsibility for those around us, even if we do it imperfectly. I also reflect on how ideas about love can be used to cultivate good attitudes and values in educational praxis, contending that one of the best pedagogical tools is a life embodying love and that literature presents a richly-textured space to examine such examples. For this purpose, I study the character Corrigan from Colum McCann's recent novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), and examine how he struggles with the demands of caring for others even as he works for a better future through love.

Love, declares Erich Fromm, “is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence” (123). To make sure his readers get the importance of his point, he goes on to heighten his claim: “any society which excludes, relatively, the development of love, must in the long run perish of its own contradiction with the basic necessities of human nature” (123). For Fromm, love stands out as essential to both personal and social relationships – it functions as a cornerstone of ethical human behaviour, and therefore deserves serious critical attention. But despite Fromm’s insistence on the necessity of a social discourse about love as a vital part of human relationships, talk about love – both inside and outside of the academy – often seems to be conspicuously absent. Love is most readily associated with romance or the family rather than how to live well with other people. Even in academic discourse, love becomes transmuted into discussions of desire rather than accorded any value of its own; it certainly is not considered to possess any political efficacy or value as a principle of good human conduct. Nevertheless, love continues to hold a fascination for thinkers preoccupied with questions of how it can help us address the challenges of living together in the twenty-first century, when daily events provoke feelings of anxiety, instability, and violence. Diverse scholars, philosophers, and writers have all pondered the issue of how an attention to love can transform our ethical values and shape our daily activities. They see love as a powerful force that can disrupt aggressive self-interest, break us out of narrow viewpoints, and help us strive for better relationships as well as more responsible societies.

In a very well-known passage from the biblical book of 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always

perseveres” (13:4-9 New International Version). While both Paul’s and Christianity’s reputation in dealing with others has often been tarnished, Paul’s formulation of love reveals a template for how to conceive and enact love in everyday life. Paul challenged traditional notions of what a community should look like, insisting that we all have a profound responsibility to others. Emmanuel Levinas would also take up this emphasis on ethical responsibility much later, and both he and Paul offer our contemporary moment a constructive paradigm for considering the meaning and principles of good human conduct, respect, and acceptance. Levinas’ insistence on an absolute obligation to others provides a counterpoint to Paul’s ideas, which display a markedly pragmatic orientation: love is meant to be enacted in daily relationships in concrete ways. Martha Nussbaum, Erich Fromm, Zygmunt Bauman, and Hannah Arendt help us to imagine what those concrete ways might be, particularly in terms of personal conduct writ large into the fabric of political culture. In this essay, I explore how these thinkers prompt us to reconsider the place of love in our lives and in our societies, as well as urge us to become more loving human beings who demonstrate responsibility for those around us even if we do it imperfectly. I also reflect on how these ideas can be used to cultivate good attitudes and values in educational praxis, suggesting that the best pedagogical tool is a life embodying the kind of love of which Paul speaks and that literature presents a richly-textured space to examine such examples. For this purpose, I study the character Corrigan from Colum McCann’s recent novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009), and examine how he struggles with the demands of caring for others even as he works for a better future through love.