

What's Love?

The man was sad today. He knew his life was, in one particular area, a failure. As an infant, toddler, child, adolescent, and until seventeen, or barely adulthood, the man never, while associating with people, knew that happiness could be an outcome. He and his friends laughed, but he went everywhere alone and left the same way. His anxiety was fashioned like a thin, brittle stick, strapped to his mind and heart, that only relaxed when he was alone. A room with the door shut never qualified as him being alone because, countless times in countless rooms, he had been physically or sexually assaulted, many times both at once, in rooms with closed doors. For the man's first five years, he only knew the severest abuse. He had fleeting memories of kind moments, of course, but they were like dandelions surviving in the midst of an unwatered and abandoned garden.

The man hated that he had been abandoned, yet he had somehow taken ownership of his sad fate. The man didn't know that he hadn't learned what it felt like to be loved or to love until much later in his life. He only knew the life he had lived.

From five until fifty-five, he mimicked the behaviour of some he found intelligent and kind; he had girlfriends, relationships, and marriages, all of which failed, leaving him bewildered and alone.

After that, the man again delved into his introspection and finally understood that he had been ignorant of the reason for those failures. He laughed, knowing he could just as easily cry, and sitting back, he took a deep breath. Because finally, now, he joined his experiences as a youngster and got that, while a toddler, he had learned the sadistic physical and sexual exploitations perpetrated by his caregivers, but never love, friendships, loyalty, or even social skills. Later, when he learned that pretending to know love made people more amenable, he tried

that. However, the void remained; he still did not know what love was, and when his relationships crashed around him, he did what his parents did to him- abandoned them.

He watched people who acted as if, or said, they loved him, but because he could only pretend to love, they left when they learned he didn't love them. No one ever connected the dots that his words and actions left in plain sight. He couldn't say he didn't know what love was because he didn't know how to discuss something he didn't know.

As a curious guy, he investigated whether emotions are innate or learned. To his surprise, he found that we're born with only five emotions, and even more telling is that love is not one of them. Love is, among others, a learned emotion.

To their everlasting credit, a few people loved him. A few of them raged at him in their frustration, screaming that he had mother issues, that he was unfaithful, or that he was selfish.

And he couldn't argue with them because they were yelling the truth. And he would sometimes cry while agreeing that he was indeed the problem, yet he didn't know the reason. He wanted to do what they were demanding: he wanted to do the thing called love, but he had no idea what it was. Several other friends didn't deal with him as a transaction; instead, they loved him because they loved him, and while he couldn't trust, understand or accept what they called love, he tried.

The man's parents had abandoned him at birth, so there was a lot of good he didn't get, and there was a lot of bad he got instead. Psychologists and psychiatrists, he spoke with, told him he suffered from PTSD. While that was probably true, their focus was on the nastiness, gravity, and longevity of the abuse he had been subjected to. There was no mention of interjecting positive, remedial, emotional learning to, perhaps, acquire the positive emotions he didn't get from the foster homes. Several people saved him during his darkest and starkest times by quenching a need for something he desperately wanted but couldn't articulate.

He discovered that when he liked someone or something, he wanted to keep doing it. And while that wasn't love, it had worked until it didn't.

As he aged, the women he sought also did, so the transactional relationships he found fulfilling grew rarer, until finally he was alone. The man had several excellent friends, and he acknowledged that these were friends despite him occasionally but unconsciously trying to abandon those relationships, even with people he liked. His ability to walk away from someone, or everyone and everything, was a trait he never lost. But these friends, a few also from abusive homes and situations, had connected the dots; they liked him as a friend and tolerated his many flaws.

The man thought these friends knew what love was, so he finally let that be enough. He decided to trust again, if only a little, because he enjoyed these friendships and knew he could always walk away.

The man wanted people to understand that when someone shares their abuse, they're also asking you to connect the nebulous dots they're sharing. They feel the abuse that happened, but not the love that didn't happen. The man's still unanswered question is, "What's love?"

"Relationships expect to give but also get love." And the man thought more, "I could never tell anyone that I couldn't give love, because I didn't know I wasn't giving it. It's a word for an emotion I don't possess."

The man smiled despite all the reasons that existed for him not to. He smiled because, long ago, he had discovered he liked smiling, and the things he liked, he kept doing.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © 4-17-2025