

Lesson Six
Social Structure

Most of what we take as "reality" is a cultural construction – "realized" through our unseen, unexamined assumptions of what is right, true, or possible.

LOVE IN FOUR CULTURES

Nimakot Village, Papua New Guinea

Late one morning, a large argument broke out in the central clearing of the village. A young man and woman named Matius and Rona sat looking dejected and ashamed near the center of the scuffle. The two teenagers had been discovered sneaking off together the previous night, and had been dragged into the clearing by their families. Rona's brother sat next to her, armed with his 29-inch machete, and looked menacingly at Matius. Matius averted his eyes and stared down at the ground, picking at the grass with his fingers as the chaos of the argument swirled around him. Rona's mother stormed across the lawn, demanding that the boy's family give her a large pig. Others from the girl's family nodded with approval and encouraged her to continue. I sat with a group of locals about 20 meters away from the main action. One of the local women turned to me with a tear in her eye as the argument escalated. Crying with tears of joy, like a mother watching her own daughter on her wedding day, she said, "This is just like when I got married!"

There are no formal ritual "weddings" in this part of New Guinea, but events like this often mark the moment that a man and

woman announce their commitment to one another. By the end of the vigorous discussion, the "bride price" had been set. Matius would need to give the bride's family 95 items such as string bags, clothes, and machetes. At a total market value of nearly \$3,000 USD, the request was many times the amount of wealth of any typical villager. He would have to call upon his entire family for help, but even that would not be enough. The challenge of building such a tremendous amount of wealth would become an all-consuming and tremendously stressful task for the next several years of his life. At stake was his entire future – children, family, respect – even his most basic sense of manhood.

Maasai Boarding School, Kenya

When Esther was 14, she learned that her father planned to give her away in marriage to an older man. She ran away to her older sister's house, who helped her enroll in a school far away. But her father rushed the wedding plans, and her mother tracked her down and removed her from the school. Still hoping that she could escape the arranged marriage, she went to the District Officer, who told her about a rescue center sponsored by an international aid team that hopes to save young girls like Esther from early marriage and give her a chance at school.

Her father came to the rescue center to retrieve Esther, but the headmistress would not allow it, declaring Esther "a school child." Her father disowned her on the spot. He replayed the scene to anthropologist Caroline Archambault. "Esther will be your child," he told the school. "You will give her a husband and she will never set foot in my house again."

Madurai Village, Tamil Nadu, South India

For as long as Mayandi could remember, there was only one right girl for him, his cousin. As the firstborn boy in a Kallar family of the

Tamil, it was not only his right, but also "the right thing to do" to marry his mother's brother's daughter. The girl was quite literally the right girl for him, and they had a word for it, "*murai*."

Mayandi understood that it might seem cruel to an outsider unfamiliar with their customs that someone should be forced to marry someone. As he told American anthropologist Isabel Clark-Decés about their customs, he joked that the "right" person is not always "all right." Young Tamil girls would often tease each other about the "right" boys they were destined to marry. Mayandi struck the pose of a young girl talking to her girlfriend and joked, "Runny Nose is here to see you!" or "Eggshell Eyes is at your door!"

But Mayandi, like many other young Tamil, came to love and desire his "right" girl very much. It would bring status and honor to the family to marry her. His in-laws would not be strangers and would always feel welcomed in his house. He imagined a wonderful life for himself, his bride-to-be, and their growing family.

But tragedy struck as they approached marriageable age. The bride-to-be's father got involved in a deadly fight that sent him off to prison, and she had to move into the city. Mayandi was desperate to still make things work out and pressed his mother to arrange the marriage, but it wasn't to be. She married another man two years later.

Mayandi was devastated. He refused to marry for the next 20 years. Finally, after much pressure from his family, he relented and married his sister's daughter. They now have two children.

Edinburgh, Scotland

Rabih is not worried about collecting money so that he can pay for a bride. He is not worried about his sister being pulled out of school and being forced to marry a man against her will, and he would never dream of marrying his cousin. Rabih has his own set of troubles as he pursues love and marriage.

Rabih is "in love," as they say in his culture. As he sits in his room daydreaming about her, his mind wanders to fantasies of their future together. He lets his mind run free and wonders whether or not she might be "the One," his "soul mate" who will "complete him." It is his highest ideal, and the thing he wants more than anything in his life.

Feelings of passionate love are not unknown throughout the world. Anthropologists have documented them in nearly every culture they have studied, and have found evidence for romantic love going back thousands of years. But there is something historically and culturally unique about the feelings of people like Rabih. In the words of philosopher Allain de Botton, who tells the story of Rabih in *The Course of Love*, finding and falling in love "has been allowed to take on the status of something close to the purpose of life," and this feeling should be the foundation upon which a marriage should be built. "True love" is everlasting, and thought to be the most important part of a good marriage. If passion fades, it was not "true love."

This is precisely what worries Rabih. He has been in love before. He has hurt and been hurt. How can he be sure that this is the one? How can he make sure that their passion for one another will continue to burn?



In this chapter, we'll explore love and marriage in four different cultures. In order to understand their radically different ideas, ideals, and practices, we will have to use our anthropological tools for seeing our own seeing, seeing big, seeing small, and seeing it all. We'll have to examine many different dimensions of culture – infrastructure, social structure, and superstructure – to see how they all come to bear on ideas and practices of love and marriage.

Culture, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, is a powerful structure, but this structure is *con*-structured. The structure is nothing but the total sum of all of our actions, habits, ideas, ideals, beliefs,

values and practices, no matter how big or small. A cultural structure is a powerful force in our lives. It provides the context and meaning for our lives. But, at the same time, our collective actions make the structure.

We make the structure.

The structure makes us.

This exploration will not only help us understand how different cultural realities get "real-ized," but might also help us understand our own realities in new ways. Such an exploration might even help speed us along on our own journeys toward understanding those perplexing questions about love that Rabih is trying to answer. As Alain de Botton notes, it will ultimately be Rabih's ability to see past his cultural conventions that will allow him to live up to his cultural ideals. He suggests that Rabih will need

"...to recognize that the very things that he once considered romantic – wordless intuitions, instantaneous longings, a trust in soul mates – are what stand in the way of learning how to be with someone. He will surmise that love can endure only when one is unfaithful to its beguiling opening ambitions, and that, for his relationships to work, he will need to give up on the feelings that got him into them in the first place. He will need to learn that love is a skill rather than an enthusiasm."

A WORLD WITHOUT MONEY

Nimakot, Papua New Guinea

Matius had big plans for the day. He would be seeing one of his trading partners from a distant village, and hoped that he could ask him to support him in his quest to pay his bride price. It didn't bother Matius that his trade partner would be part of a planned attack on his village. In fact, he seemed excited by the prospect.

As word of the pending attack spread, all of the men from the village, along with a few close friends and kin from other villages, came in from their garden houses and hunting excursions, filling the village with a sense of intense anticipation. Men performed chants and dances in the village clearing, pumping themselves up for the attack, while women peeked out through the cracks and darkened doorways of village huts, anxiously awaiting what was to come.

We built a barricade of trees, limbs, and vines along the main path, but we knew this would do little more than slow them down.

Around noon, we heard a twig snap just beyond our barrier, and the village erupted into a frenzy of action. "Woop! Woop! Woop!" we heard the attackers call out, as dozens of them crashed our barricade and came rushing down the mountain into our village. Their faces were painted red and their hands dripped with what looked like blood, but they were not armed with spears or bows. They were armed instead with sweet potatoes dripping with delicious and fatty red marita sauce. They smashed the dripping tubers into our faces, forcing us to eat, attacking us with kindness and generosity.

They left as quickly as they came, but the challenge was set. We were to follow them back to their village and see if we could handle all the food they had prepared for us. We had to navigate a series of booby traps and sneak attacks of generosity along the way, sweet potatoes and taro being thrown at us from the trees. When we finally arrived at the edge of the village, their troops gathered for one last intimidating chant. They circled in and yelled as loudly as they could for as long as they could, letting the giant collective yell drown out in a thumping rhythmic and barrel-chested "Woop! Woop! Woop!" We responded in kind with our own chant, and then charged in for the food.

As we entered the village, we found a giant pit filled with red marita juice filled to the brim with hundreds of sweet potatoes and taro. It was bigger than a kiddie pool, no less than six feet across and nearly two feet deep. The marita seeds that had been washed to create this pool littered every inch of ground throughout the entire

village. It was no wonder that the attack had taken several days to prepare.

We settled in for the feast with gusto, dozens of us taking our turn at the pit. But an hour in we were starting to fade, and the waterline of our pool of food seemed barely to budge. Our hosts laughed in triumph and started boasting about how they had gathered too much food for us to handle, giving credit to those among them who cleaned it, processed it, thanking each contributor in turn, and then proudly boasting again that their generosity was too much for us. We left, defeated, but already taking stock of our own marita produce and planning a return attack in the near future.

This is a world without money, banks, or complex insurance policies. Their items of value (like marita and sweet potatoes) cannot be stored indefinitely without spoiling. So large events like this serve a similar function as our banks and insurance companies. When they have a windfall of marita they give it away, knowing that when we have a windfall of marita we will return the favor. Such events strengthen social bonds and trade relationships, which are essential to survival in tough times.

For decades, most economists built their models on rational choice theory – the assumption that all humans are selfish and seek to maximize their own material gain. But these beliefs and values may be a reflection of our own socially constructed realities revolving around money in a market economy, rather than human nature. In these New Guinea villages, they struggle instead to demonstrate their generosity and minimize their material gain. They are not trying to accumulate wealth. Instead, they are trying to nurture relationships through which wealth can flow. This does not mean they are not rational, but when applied in New Guinea, rational choice theory has to account for the different motives and values created within the cultural context of different economic systems.

Anthropologists describe the difference between these economic systems as *gift economies* and *market economies*. In both economies, the

same items might be exchanged and distributed, but in one they are treated as gifts and in the other they are treated as commodities.

Take, for example, a bag of sweet potatoes. In a gift economy, the bag of sweet potatoes is given with no immediate payment expected or desired. Instead, the giver hopes to strengthen the relationship between themselves and the recipient. The giver will likely give a brief biography of the potatoes, who planted them, tended them, harvested them, and so on, so that the recipient understands their connection to several people who have all contributed to the gift. In a commodity economy, that same bag becomes a commodity. It has a price, something like \$5, and the recipient is expected to pay this price immediately. Once the price is paid, the transaction is over.

There are strong practical reasons for gift economies and market economies. Gift economies tend to thrive in small communities and where most things of value have a short shelf-life. Wealth is not easily stored, and there are no banks or currencies for them to store their wealth in either. The best way to "store" wealth is to nurture strong relationships. That way, when your own maritas are not ripe or your garden is out of food, all of those people that you have given to in the past will be there to give to you.

But beyond these practical reasons for the gift economy, are also some profound implications for the core values, ideas, and ideals that emerge in gift economies. In gift economies, people are constantly engaged in relationship-building activities as they give and receive gifts throughout the day. The constant reminders of where the gift came from and all the hands that helped give them a profound sense of interdependence. Along with this sense of interdependence comes a value on relationships rather than things. Most "things" are quickly consumed, rot, and fall apart. It is far more beneficial to have a strong network of relationships than a big pile of slowly rotting sweet potatoes.

It is only in this context that we can begin to understand the practice of "bride price" in New Guinea, and why Matius must face

this seemingly impossible task of gathering \$3,000 worth of items in exchange for his bride. From the Western perspective grounded in the logic of a market economy, this looks like he is "buying" a wife. But from the logic of a gift economy, he is building and strengthening a vast network of social relationships that will soon unite his network with the network of his bride.

The day turns out to be a great success for Matius. His trading partner has agreed to support him. His gift will join with the gifts of many others. And when Matius gives this bundle of gifts to his bride's family, they will spread those gifts throughout their network. By the logic of the gift economy, these people will give back, and a large cycle of giving will be created that unites two large networks that intersect at the new node created by the union of the bride and groom.

MARRIAGE WITHOUT LOVE

Maasai Boarding School, Kenya

A similar gift logic operates among the Maasai as well. When Esther's father arranged for her marriage at age 14, he was following a customary system in which the parents of both the bride and groom agree on the marriage terms for their children while they are still young. The bride price is paid over the course of the entire marriage. "There is probably no greater gift, as viewed by the Maasai, than having been given a daughter," notes Dr. Achimbault. "Marriage is understood and valued as an alliance of families."

Esther's father has three wives and 26 children. This practice of having many wives, known as polygyny, is common among pastoralists like the Maasai. This practice can be especially perplexing to any Westerner who believes in "true love." In a recent BBC program, a BBC reporter approached some Maasai teenage boys and asks directly, "What does love mean to you?" The boys laugh shyly and one of them rocks back and forth uncomfortably with a broad

smile on his face. "That's a real challenge!" one exclaims and asks his friend to answer, who just giggles and turns away.

The reporter presses on the issue of polygyny. "When you do get married, are you going to take more than one wife or just one?" she asks. One boy answers matter-of-factly, "I will take one or two but no more than two."

She is taken aback by the nonchalance of his answer. She counters by joking with him, saying if he only takes one he can have her, but she would never be involved in a polygynous marriage. The man starts laughing. "But the work would be very hard for just one wife," the young man explains. "You would have to look after the cows, goats, water, and firewood – all on your own!"

Recent anthropological studies by Dr. Monique Borgerhoff Mulder support the man's argument and show that polygynous households among the Maasai have better access to food and healthier children.

One of the Maasai women wants to show the reporter that polygamy is actually good for them, and takes her to see the most senior wife of a polygynous family. She lives in a beautiful brick home, far superior to most of the other homes in the region. The economic incentive for polygyny seems clear, but the reporter is still skeptical about the quality of the marriage relationships. "Don't you get jealous of the other wives?" the reporter asks.

"No, no. Never."

"Do you argue?"

"No ... we're friends. We never fight. We are all the same age. We tell stories. We have fun."

Marriage practices like this are especially mystifying for people in the West. For many Westerners, love is our biggest concern and our strongest value, so when we find cultures that practice arranged marriage or polygamy, we find it strange and immediately infer that there may be a violation of basic human rights. But if we look at all humans through all time, it is *our* ideas about love that are strange.

Over 80 percent of all cultures worldwide practice polygyny (one man married to more than one woman) and a handful of others practice polyandry (one woman married to more than one man). As hinted at by the response from the Maasai teen that the work of a household would be very difficult for just one woman, the common reasons given for why these forms of marriage often come down to practicality. There is no mention of love.

Such marriages often make sense within the culture and environment. For example, in Tibet, where arable land is scarce and passed down through males, several brothers may marry one woman in order to keep the land together. As anthropologist Melvyn Goldstein has pointed out, if the land were divided among all sons in each generation, it would only take a few generations for the land to be too small to provide enough for the families.

Despite these apparent practical benefits, the value and romanticism we place on love makes the idea of young girls like Esther being married off at a young age unpalatable to most Westerners. When Esther's father attempts to remove her from school and arrange her marriage, he seems to be upholding oppressive patriarchal values.

But Esther's father is practical and he wants what is best for his children. He has sent most of his kids to school in hopes that they can find new ways to make a living. However, school is far away and expensive. Due to the dangers and difficulties of getting to school, most girls enter school late, just as they are reaching reproductive age. This creates a risk of early pregnancy, which will get them kicked out of school and greatly limit their marriage prospects. Furthermore, the schools have high drop-out rates and even those who finish are not guaranteed a job.

Pastoralism – the traditional way of making a living – has become more difficult due to frequent droughts brought about by climate change. Land privatization poses an additional problem, since a pastoralist is now constricted to the land to which he has a legal right. In times of drought and scarcity, movement across vast land areas is

essential. One strategy for increasing the land one has access to is to create alliances between lineages through strategically arranged marriages. When Esther's father tried to pull her out of school, he did so because he saw an opportunity for her to have a secure future as a pastoralist with access to good land.

After laying out these essential pieces of context, Archambault makes the case that we should be skeptical of simple "binaries" that frame one side as "modern" and empowering of females and the other as "traditional" and upholding the patriarchy. Such binaries are common among NGOs promoting their plan to improve human rights. But through the lens of anthropology, we can see our assumptions, see the big picture, and see the details that allow us to understand the cultural situation, empathize with the people involved, and ultimately make more informed policy decisions.

LOVE WITHOUT MARRIAGE

Madurai Village, Tamil Nadu, South India

Sunil's marriage prospects looked good. In an arranged marriage among the Tamil, families carefully consider the wealth, status, reputation, and earning potential of potential marriage partners. Sunil had it all, and he was on his way to earning a prestigious law degree. But then he was struck by *katal* – an overwhelming sense of intense and dumbfounded longing for another person that we might call "love" in English. They say it is a "great feeling" that can "drive you crazy" and compels you to "do things you would not ordinarily do." It is a "permanent intoxication," as one 18-year old Tamil put it.

Love like this is known all over the world. Anthropologist Helen Fisher looked at 166 cultures, and found evidence of passionate love in 147 of them. As for the rest, she suspects that the ethnographers just did not pay attention to it. The Tamil are no different. The feeling of love may not be the foundation for their arranged marriages, but that does not mean the Tamil do not feel love.

Sunil described the girl as "smart, free, funny, and popular." He met up with her every day after class, and soon he was, as he says, "addicted" to her. Addiction might be the right word. Fisher studied brain scans of people in love and found that the caudate nucleus and ventral tegmental area of the brains lit up each time they were shown an image of their lover. These are areas of the brain associated with rewards, pleasure, and focused attention. Other studies have found that falling in love floods our brain with chemicals associated with the reward circuit, fueling two apparently opposite but mutually sustaining emotions: passion and anxiety. Overall, the studies reveal a chemical profile similar to someone with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

When two people share these feelings together, they can experience a shared euphoria like almost no other experience available to humankind. But when only one person feels this obsessive-compulsive form of passionate love – or when one person stops feeling it while the other still feels it – it can unleash a devastating psychological breakdown.

Sunil's romance was rocky. They started disagreeing and using harsh words with one another. After a fight one night, Sunil worried that she would leave him. His obsession gripped him with a flood of anxiety. He tried calling her at 2 am, but she did not answer. Desperate to talk to her, he went to her college early the next morning in hopes of catching her before her first class. "She was so happy to see me in the pathetic state I was in," Sunil lamented. When she called later to break off the relationship, Sunil completely broke down. He became an alcoholic and had to drop out of law school.

After two years of pain and trouble, he finally got over her, stopped drinking, and finished law school. But by then he had already missed out on his best opportunity for a successful arranged marriage with his favorite cousin. The perfect match, someone he had thought about marrying since the time he was a teenager, had come of age while he was drinking away his sorrows and had already married someone else (a different cousin).

Sunil's story represents an interesting tension at work as Tamil society continues to change. A more urban and mobile society creates more opportunities for young people to meet strangers and to feel *katal* for them. Education and career opportunities take young people far from home and family. The culture is starting to value individualism, free choice, and autonomy – all of which come together to make love marriages seem attractive. A common theme of Indian movies and television shows is the tension between love and arranged marriages.

However, most Tamil do not elope and create love marriages. From the standpoint of the family, the reasons are clear. As anthropologist Clark-Decés points out, "The basic explanation for this is that marriage is too important to be left to chance individual attraction – in fact, a child's marriage is the most important and often the most expensive decision a South Asian family ever has to make."

Worldwide, arranged marriages are especially common when a significant transfer of wealth is at stake, such as a large inheritance, bride price, or dowry. In India, marriage usually entails very large gifts between the families, often the equivalent of three years of salary or more. When the wealth of an entire extended family is on the line, everybody in the extended family has a vested interest in the union and arranged marriages are the norm and ideal.

It is not surprising then that the parents of bride and groom would prefer an arranged marriage. However, Clark-Decés and other anthropologists note that arranged marriage remains the norm and ideal among youth as well. Young men like Sunil want to achieve success and respectability within the ideals and values of their culture. They view marriage as the union of two families, not just two people. And ultimately, "for them, an arranged marriage is a sign of parental love."

This preference for arranged marriages has a profound impact on how people grow up. As Clark-Decés points out, the social category of "bachelor" is non-existent. Tamil youth do not spend a great deal of time in their teens and twenties worrying about who to date or

how to date, since that is rarely the road toward marriage. Instead, they focus primarily on attaining significant status markers that confer wealth and prestige, such as their education. Whereas college in the United States is often seen as a place to meet a potential mate, college in South India is a place where one earns a degree to elevate their status for an arranged marriage.

It is not that love is absent or impossible in arranged marriages, but it is not the primary basis upon which marriages are formed. In a recent survey, 76% of Indians said they would marry someone if they had the right qualities, even if they were not in love. Only 14% of Americans would do so. As Leena Abraham found in a study of college students in Mumbai, love marriages are "seen as an arrangement beset with enormous insecurity."

ORIGINS OF LOVE MARRIAGE

Love marriage was once uncommon in the West as well. It was not until the Industrial Revolution and the broad cultural changes that came with it that love marriage became the norm. With the Industrial Revolution, individuals were no longer tied to land held in the family name. They became more mobile and less dependent on family and community for survival. People started orienting their lives more toward the market, and they could use the state for a safety net, weakening their dependency on relationships and family.

This increased individualism had two competing effects. On the one hand, it gave people more freedom. They became accustomed to making individual choices every moment of the day. But this freedom came with a cost. As they had more and more choices about what to buy, what to do, and how to act, they were also increasingly troubled with the question of whether or not they were choosing the right thing to buy, the right thing to do, or the right way to act. They came to suffer from a sense of what Emile Durkheim called *anomie*, a condition in which society provides little guidance and leaves people feeling lost and disconnected.

Feeling empowered by the power to choose, yet feeling lost and disconnected, romantic love marriage emerged as the perfect solution. We go searching for "the One" who can make us "feel whole" and "completes us." This is the key to understanding just how different we are from those Massai teens. They live in small, close-knit communities full of tight bonds to family and friends. Large, close-knit families are still the ideal in India as well. They do not need more intimacy. They have enough of it already. We, on the other hand, often feel alone, lost, and insecure. We crave intimacy. We crave a sense of validation. And we find that through love.

Unfortunately, this sets up an impossible situation. With the breakdown of family and community, we often turn to our lovers for intimacy, friendship, and economic support. One person is expected to provide all of this and passion at the same time. "We now ask our lovers for the emotional connection and sense of belonging that my grandmother could get from a whole village," notes family therapist Sue Johnson. But the security necessary for the intimacy and friendship we crave along with the everyday trials and mundanity of running a household can kill passion.

THE PARADOXES OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

Edinburgh, Scotland

"For most of recorded history, people married for logical sorts of reasons: because her parcel of land adjoined yours, his family had a flourishing grain business, her father was the magistrate in town, there was a castle to keep up, or both sets of parents subscribed to the same interpretation of a holy text ... what has replaced it – the marriage of feeling ... What matters is that two people wish desperately that it happen, are drawn to another by an overwhelming instinct, and know in their hearts that it is right."

- Allain de Botton

In his book *The Course of Love*, philosopher Alain de Botton tells the love story of Rabih and Kirsten, along with his cutting observations about love and marriage. After a whirlwind romance, Rabih proposes to her, hoping to capture the feelings he and Kirsten have for each other and preserve them forever. Unfortunately, you cannot freeze a feeling, or marry one. You have to marry a person with whom you once shared a feeling. And feelings are not necessarily forever.

In *A Natural History of Love*, anthropologist Helen Fisher identifies two kinds of love: the burning fire of romantic passionate love, and the enduring intimacy and calm of companionate love. These two loves have very different chemical profiles in the brain. Romantic love is a rush of dopamine, a drop in serotonin, and a rise in cortisol that creates an intense passion and desire. Companionate love activates the attachment circuits of the brain. It is oxytocin-rich and induces a loving calm and sense of security. Unfortunately, this sense of calm and security can actually work against our feelings of passion. Passion thrives on insecurity. The reason for our obsessive ruminations and fluttering hearts is in part the very frightening idea that we might lose this person or that they might not return our love. The more we try to freeze the feeling by "locking in" the relationship through promises, proposals, or other means of entanglement, the more we drive it away. A desire for connection requires a sense of separation. The more we fuse our lives together, the less passionate we become.

This is not a problem in many cultures where passion in marriage is not required or expected. But in the West, there is a strong sense that "true love" burns with passion forever. If passion fades, it isn't "true love."

So as Rabih and Kirsten squabble in Ikea over which drinking glasses to purchase for their apartment, there is a lot more at stake than mere aesthetics. This will be one of thousands of little squabbles that are unavoidable when merging two lives, but they will always reflect deeper concerns and misgivings each one has about the other

person. Such squabbles will be the main forum where they will try to shape and shift one another, make adaptations and compromises in who they are, and assess the quality of their relationship.

These negotiations are fraught with tension because of another ideal of "true love"—that it is unconditional, and that if someone truly loves you they will unequivocally accept you for all that you are and never try to change you. Each little push or prod feels like a rejection of the self.

Behind these feelings are deep and profound cultural assumptions about love itself. We tend to focus on love as a feeling. But according to a landmark book by psychologist Erich Fromm, our focus should not be on "being loved" so much as it should be on the *act of loving* and building up one's capacity to love. This insight runs counter to the cultural ideal of "true love" which says that when we find the right person, love will come easily and without effort. As a result of our misunderstandings about love, Fromm argues, "there is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hopes and expectations, and yet, which fails so regularly, as love."

This basic insight is easy to accept intellectually, but it is quite another thing to incorporate it into your everyday life. For Rabih and Kirsten, it is the arrival of their first child that helps them understand love as something to give rather than something to merely feel and expect to be given. The helpless and demanding baby gives them ample practice in selfless love of another without any expectation of return.

Unfortunately for Rabih and Kirsten, their ability to love their child does not translate into an act of loving for one another. In the midst of sleepless nights, diaper changes, and domestic duties, there is little love left to give after caring for the baby. Over the coming years, Rabih and Kirsten admire each other greatly for the patience and care shown for their children, but also feel pangs of remorse and jealousy that such love and kindness had become so rare between them.

One would think that after so many years of marriage, people would stop needing a sense of validation from the other. But, de Botton notes, "we are never through with the requirement for acceptance. This isn't a curse limited to the inadequate and the weak." So long as we continue to care about the other person, we are unlikely to be able to free ourselves from concerns about how they feel about us.

Unfortunately, Rabih and Kirsten need very different things to feel a sense of validation. Rabih wants to rekindle the passionate love they once shared in sexual union. But after a long day of giving her body and self to her children, Kirsten does not want to be touched. She needs time to herself, and Rabih's "romantic" proposals feel like just another thing to put on her long "to do" list for others.

Allain de Botton's *Story of Love* recounts many twists and turns in the love story of Rabih and Kirsten. It is an honest portrayal of a true love story in which seemingly mundane arguments about who does more housework take their rightful place alongside more dramatic affairs and bouts of jealousy. Though they often feel distance between them, they go through everything – raising kids, watching their own parents grow old and die – together.

It is only after all of this – 13 years after saying their vows – that Rabih finally feels "ready for marriage." He is ready not because he is finally secure in an unequivocal faith in a perfect love with his soul mate for whom he feels an unbounding and never-ending sense of passion, but because he has given up on the idea that love should come easily. He is committed to the *art of loving*, not just a desire to *be loved*, and looks forward to all that his life, his wife, and his children might teach him along the way.



LEARN MORE

- ❖ “Ethnographic Empathy and the Social Context of Rights: ‘Rescuing’ Maasai Girls from Early marriage” by Caroline S. Archambault. *American Anthropologist* 113(4):632-643.
- ❖ *The Right Spouse: Preferential Marriages in Tamil Nadu*, by Isabelle Clark-Decés
- ❖ *The Course of Love: A Novel* by Alain de Botton