

all

about

love

NEW VISIONS

bell hooks

ALL ABOUT LOVE

N E W V I S I O N S

bell hooks

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WILLIAM MORROW

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An Inquiry of Target Communities

Dedication

the first love letter i ever wrote was sent to you. just as this book was written to talk to you. anthony—you have been my most intimate listener. i will love you always.

in the song of solomon there is this passage that reads: “i found him whom my soul loves. i held him and would not let him go.” to holding on, to knowing again that moment of rapture, of recognition where we can face one another as we really are, stripped of artifice and pretense, naked and not ashamed.

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Preface

WHEN I WAS a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love. I wish I could testify that I came to this awareness because of the love I felt in my life. But it was love's absence that let me know how much love mattered. I was my father's first daughter. At the moment of my birth, I was looked upon with loving kindness, cherished and made to feel wanted on this earth and in my home. To this day I cannot remember when that feeling of being loved left me. I just know that one day I was no longer precious. Those who had initially loved me well turned away. The absence of their recognition and regard pierced my heart and left me with a feeling of brokenheartedness so profound I was spellbound.

Grief and sadness overwhelmed me. I did not know what I had done wrong. And nothing I tried made it right. No other connection healed the hurt of that first abandonment, that first banishment from love's paradise. For years I lived my life suspended, trapped by the past, unable to move into the future. Like every wounded child I just wanted to turn back time and be in that paradise again, in that moment of remembered rapture where I felt loved, where I felt a sense of belonging.

We can never go back. I know that now. We can go forward. We can find the love our hearts long for, but not until we let go grief about the love we lost long ago, when we were little and had no voice to speak the heart's longing. All the years of my life I thought I was searching for love I found, retrospectively, to be years where I was simply trying to recover what had been lost, to return to the first home, to get back the rapture of first love. I was not really ready to love or be loved in the present. I was still mourning—clinging to the broken heart of girlhood, to broken connections. When that mourning ceased I was able to love again.

I awakened from my trance state and was stunned to find the world I was living in, the world of the present, was no longer a world open to love. And I noticed that all around me I heard testimony that lovelessness had become the order of the day. I feel our nation's turning away from love as intensely as I felt love's abandonment in my girlhood. Turning away we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way

home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love. Redeemed and restored, love returns us to the promise of everlasting life. When we love we can let our hearts speak.

Introduction

Grace: Touched by Love

It is possible to speak with our heart directly. Most ancient cultures know this. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend. In modern life we have become so busy with our daily affairs and thoughts that we have lost this essential art of taking time to converse with our heart.

—JACK KORNFIELD

ON MY KITCHEN wall hang four snapshots of graffiti art I first saw on construction walls as I walked to my teaching job at Yale University years ago. The declaration, “The search for love continues even in the face of great odds,” was painted in bright colors. At the time, recently separated from a partner of almost fifteen years, I was often overwhelmed by grief so profound it seemed as though an immense sea of pain was washing my heart and soul away. Overcome by sensations of being pulled underwater, drowning, I was constantly searching for anchors to keep me afloat, to pull me back safely to the shore. The declaration on the construction walls with its childlike drawing of unidentifiable animals always lifted my spirits. Whenever I passed this site, the affirmation of love’s possibility sprawling across the block gave me hope.

Signed with the first name of local artist, these works spoke to my heart. Reading them I felt certain the artist was undergoing a crisis in his life, either already confronting loss or facing the possibility of loss. In my head I

engaged in imaginary conversations about the meaning of love with him. I told him how his playful graffiti art anchored me and helped restore my faith in love. I talked about the way this declaration with its promise of a love waiting to be found, a love I could still hope for, lifted me out of the abyss I had fallen into. My grief was a heavy, despairing sadness caused by parting from a companion of many years but, more important, it was a despair rooted in the fear that love did not exist, could not be found. And even if it were lurking somewhere, I might never know it in my lifetime. It had become hard for me to continue to believe in love's promise when everywhere I turned the enchantment of power or the terror of fear overshadowed the will to love.

One day on my way to work, looking forward to the day's meditation on love that the sight of the graffiti art engendered, I was stunned to find that the construction company had painted over the picture with a white paint so glaringly bright it was possible to see faint traces of the original art underneath. Upset that what had now become a ritual affirmation of love's grace was no longer there to welcome me, I told everyone of my disappointment. Finally someone passed on the rumor that the graffiti art had been whitewashed because the words were a reference to individuals living with HIV and that the artist might be gay. Perhaps. It is just as likely that the men who splashed paint on the wall were threatened by this public confessing of a longing for love—a longing so intense it could not only be spoken but was deliberately searched for.

After much searching I located the artist and talked with him face-to-face about the meaning of love. We spoke about the way public art can be a vehicle for the sharing of life-affirming thoughts. And we both expressed our grief and annoyance that the construction company had so callously covered up a powerful message about love. To remind me of the construction walls, he gave me snapshots of the graffiti art. From the time we met, everywhere I have lived I have placed these snapshots above my kitchen sink. Every day, when I drink water or take a dish from the cupboard, I stand before this reminder that we yearn for love—that we seek it—even when we lack hope that it really can be found.

THERE ARE NOT many public discussions of love in our culture right now. At best, popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is

talked about. Movies, music, magazines, and books are the place where we turn to hear our yearnings for love expressed. Yet the talk is not the life-affirming discourse of the sixties and seventies, which urged us to believe “All you need is love.” Nowadays the most popular messages are those that declare the meaninglessness of love, its irrelevance. A glaring example of this cultural shift was the tremendous popularity of Tina Turner’s song with the title boldly declaring, “What’s Love Got to Do with It.” I was saddened and appalled when I interviewed a well-known female rapper at least twenty years my junior who, when asked about love, responded with biting sarcasm, “Love, what’s that—I have never had any love in my life.”

Youth culture today is cynical about love. And that cynicism has come from their pervasive feeling that love cannot be found. Expressing this concern in *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*, Harold Kushner writes: “I am afraid that we may be raising a generation of young people who will grow up afraid to love, afraid to give themselves completely to another person, because they will have seen how much it hurts to take the risk of loving and have it not work out. I am afraid that they will grow up looking for intimacy without risk, for pleasure without significant emotional investment. They will be so fearful of the pain of disappointment that they will forgo the possibilities of love and joy.” Young people are cynical about love. Ultimately, cynicism is the great mask of the disappointed and betrayed heart.

When I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place of love in any movement for social justice. Indeed, all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic. Yet young listeners remain reluctant to embrace the idea of love as a transformative force. To them, love is for the naive, the weak, the hopelessly romantic. Their attitude is mirrored in the grown-ups they turn to for explanations. As spokesperson for a disillusioned generation, Elizabeth Wurtzel asserts in *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*: “None of us are getting better at loving: we are getting more scared of it. We were not given good skills to begin with, and the choices we make have tended only to reinforce our sense that it is hopeless and useless.” Her words echo all that I hear an older generation say about love.

When I talked of love with my generation, I found it made everyone nervous or scared, especially when I spoke about not feeling loved enough.

On several occasions as I talked about love with friends, I was told I should consider seeing a therapist. I understood that a few friends were simply weary of my bringing up the topic of love and felt that if I saw a therapist it would give them a break. But most folks were just frightened of what might be revealed in any exploration of the meaning of love in our lives.

Yet whenever a single woman over forty brings up the topic of love, again and again the assumption, rooted in sexist thinking, is that she is “desperate” for a man. No one thinks she is simply passionately intellectually interested in the subject matter. No one thinks she is rigorously engaged in a philosophical undertaking wherein she is endeavoring to understand the metaphysical meaning of love in everyday life. No, she is just seen as on the road to “fatal attraction.”

Disappointment and a pervasive feeling of brokenheartedness led me to begin thinking more deeply about the meaning of love in our culture. My longing to find love did not make me lose my sense of reason or perspective; it gave me the incentive to think more, to talk about love, and to study popular and more serious writing on the subject. As I pored over nonfiction books on the subject of love, I was surprised to find that the vast majority of the “revered” books, ones used as reference works and even those popular as self-help books, have been written by men. All my life I have thought of love as primarily a topic women contemplate with greater intensity and vigor than anybody else on the planet. I still hold this belief even though visionary female thinking on the subject has yet to be taken as seriously as the thoughts and writings of men. Men theorize about love, but women are more often love’s practitioners. Most men feel that they receive love and therefore know what it feels like to be loved; women often feel we are in a constant state of yearning, wanting love but not receiving it.

In philosopher Jacob Needleman’s primer *A Little Book About Love*, virtually all the major narratives of love he comments on are written by men. His list of significant references doesn’t include books written by women. Throughout my graduate school training for a doctorate in literature, I can recall only one woman poet being extolled as a high priestess of love—Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She was, however, considered a minor poet. Yet even the most nonliterary student among us knew the opening line of her most well-known sonnet: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” This was in pre-feminist days. In the wake of

the contemporary feminist movement, the Greek poet Sappho has now become enshrined as another love goddess.

Back then, in every creative writing course the poets dedicated to the love poem were always male. Indeed, the partner I left after many years first courted me with a love poem. He had always been emotionally unavailable and not at all interested in love as either a topic for discussion or a daily life practice, but he was absolutely confident that he had something meaningful to say on the subject. I, on the other hand, thought all my grown-up attempts to write love poems were mushy and pathetic. Words failed me when I tried to write about love. My thoughts seemed sentimental, silly, and superficial. When writing poetry in my girlhood, I had felt the same confidence I would come to see in my adult life only in male writers. When I first began to write poetry in girlhood, I thought love was the only topic, the most important passion. Indeed, the first poem I published, at age twelve, was called “a look at love.” Somewhere along the way, in that passage from girlhood to womanhood, I learned females really had nothing serious to teach the world about love.

Death became my chosen topic. No one around me, professors and students alike, doubted a woman’s ability to be serious when it came to thinking and writing about death. All the poems in my first book were on the topic of death and dying. Even so, the poem that opened the book, “The woman’s mourning song,” was about the loss of a loved one and the refusal to let death destroy memory. Contemplating death has always been a subject that leads me back to love. Significantly, I began to think more about the meaning of love as I witnessed the deaths of many friends, comrades, and acquaintances, many of them dying young and unexpectedly. When I was approaching the age of forty and facing the type of cancer scares that have become so commonplace in women’s lives they are practically routine, my first thought as I waited for test results was that I was not ready to die because I had not yet found the love my heart had been seeking.

Shortly after this crisis ended, I had a grave illness that was life threatening. Confronting the possibility of dying, I became obsessed with the meaning of love in my life and in contemporary culture. My work as a cultural critic offered me a constant opportunity to pay close attention to everything the mass media, particularly movies and magazines, tell us about love. Mostly they tell us that everyone wants love but that we remain totally

confused about the practice of love in everyday life. In popular culture love is always the stuff of fantasy. Maybe this is why men have done most of the theorizing about love. Fantasy has primarily been their domain, both in the sphere of cultural production and in everyday life. Male fantasy is seen as something that can create reality, whereas female fantasy is regarded as pure escape. Hence, the romance novel remains the only domain in which women speak of love with any degree of authority. However, when men appropriate the romance genre their work is far more rewarded than is the writing of women. A book like *The Bridges of Madison County* is the supreme example. Had a woman penned this sentimental, shallow story of love (which did, though, have its moments) it is unlikely it would ever have become such a major mainstream success, crossing all boundaries of genre.

Of course, consumers of books about love are primarily female. Yet male sexism alone does not explain the lack of more books by and about love written by women. Apparently, women are both willing and eager to hear what men have to say about love. Female sexist thinking may lead a woman to feel she already knows what another woman will say. Such a reader may feel that she has more to gain by reading what men have to say.

Earlier in my life I read books about love and never thought about the gender of the writer. Eager to understand what we mean when we speak of love, I did not really consider the extent to which gender shaped a writer's perspective. It was only when I began to think seriously about the subject of love and to write about it that I pondered whether women do this differently from men.

Reviewing the literature on love I noticed how few writers, male or female, talk about the impact of patriarchy, the way in which male domination of women and children stands in the way of love. John Bradshaw's *Creating Love: The Next Great Stage of Growth* is one of my favorite books on the topic. He valiantly attempts to establish the link between male domination (the institutionalization of patriarchy) and the lack of love of families. Famous for work that calls attention to the "inner child," Bradshaw believes that ending patriarchy is one step in the direction of love. However, his work on love has never received ongoing attention and celebration. It did not get the notice given work by men who write about love while affirming sexist-defined gender roles.

Profound changes in the way we think and act must take place if we are to create a loving culture. Men writing about love always testify that they

have received love. They speak from this position; it gives what they say authority. Women, more often than not, speak from a position of lack, of not having received the love we long for.

A woman who talks of love is still suspect. Perhaps this is because all that enlightened woman may have to say about love will stand as a direct threat and challenge to the visions men have offered us. I enjoy what male writers have to say about love. I cherish my Rumi and my Rilke, male poets who stir hearts with their words. Men often write about love through fantasy, through what they imagine is possible rather than what they concretely know. We know now that Rilke did not write as he lived, that so many words of love offered us by great men fail us when we come face to face with reality. And even though John Gray's work troubles me and makes me mad, I confess to reading and rereading *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. But, like many women and men, I want to know about the meaning of love beyond the realm of fantasy—beyond what we imagine can happen. I want to know love's truths as we live them.

Almost all the recent popular self-help writing by men on love, from works like *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* to John Welwood's *Love and Awakening*, make use of feminist perspectives on gender roles. Ultimately, though, the authors remain wedded to belief systems, which suggest that there are basic inherent differences between women and men. In actuality, all the concrete proof indicates that while the perspectives of men and women often differ, these differences are learned characteristics, not innate, or "natural," traits. If the notion that men and women were absolute opposites inhabiting totally different emotional universes were true, men would never have become the supreme authorities on love. Given gender stereotypes that assign to women the role of feelings and being emotional and to men the role of reason and non-emotion, "real men" would shy away from any talk of love.

Though considered the established "authorities" on the subject, only a few men talk freely, telling the world what they think about love. In everyday life males and females alike are relatively silent about love. Our silence shields us from uncertainty. We want to know love. We are simply afraid the desire to know too much about love will lead us closer and closer to the abyss of lovelessness. While ours is a nation wherein the vast majority of citizens are followers of religious faiths that proclaim the transformative power of love, many people feel that they do not have a clue

as to how to love. And practically everyone suffers a crisis of faith when it comes to realizing biblical theories about the art of loving in everyday life. It is far easier to talk about loss than it is to talk about love. It is easier to articulate the pain of love's absence than to describe its presence and meaning in our lives.

Taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational. And it is especially hard to speak of love when what we have to say calls attention to the fact that lovelessness is more common than love, that many of us are not sure what we mean when we talk of love or how to express love.

Everyone wants to know more about love. We want to know what it means to love, what we can do in our everyday lives to love and be loved. We want to know how to seduce those among us who remain wedded to lovelessness and open the door to their hearts to let love enter. The strength of our desire does not change the power of our cultural uncertainty. Everywhere we learn that love is important, and yet we are bombarded by its failure. In the realm of the political, among the religious, in our families, and in our romantic lives, we see little indication that love informs decisions, strengthens our understanding of community, or keeps us together. This bleak picture in no way alters the nature of our longing. We still hope that love will prevail. We still believe in love's promise.

Just as the graffiti proclaimed, our hope lies in the reality that so many of us continue to believe in love's power. We believe it is important to know love. We believe it is important to search for love's truths. In an overwhelming number of private conversations and public dialogues, I have given and heard testimony about the mounting lovelessness in our culture and the fear it strikes in everyone's heart. This despair about love is coupled with a callous cynicism that frowns upon any suggestion that love is as important as work, as crucial to our survival as a nation as the drive to succeed. Awesomely, our nation, like no other in the world, is a culture driven by the quest to love (it's the theme of our movies, music, literature) even as it offers so little opportunity for us to understand love's meaning or to know how to realize love in word and deed.

Our nation is equally driven by sexual obsession. There is no aspect of sexuality that is not studied, talked about, or demonstrated. How-to classes exist for every dimension of sexuality, even masturbation. Yet schools for

love do not exist. Everyone assumes that we will know how to love instinctively. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we still accept that the family is the primary school for love. Those of us who do not learn how to love among family are expected to experience love in romantic relationships. However, this love often eludes us. And we spend a lifetime undoing the damage caused by cruelty, neglect, and all manner of lovelessness experienced in our families of origin and in relationships where we simply did not know what to do.

Only love can heal the wounds of the past. However, the intensity of our woundedness often leads to a closing of the heart, making it impossible for us to give or receive the love that is given to us. To open our hearts more fully to love's power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice. We must face the confusion and disappointment that much of what we were taught about the nature of love makes no sense when applied to daily life. Contemplating the practice of love in everyday life, thinking about how we love and what is needed for ours to become a culture where love's sacred presence can be felt everywhere, I wrote this meditation.

As the title *All About Love: New Visions* indicates, we want to live in a culture where love can flourish. We yearn to end the lovelessness that is so pervasive in our society. This book tells us how to return to love. *All About Love: New Visions* provides radical new ways to think about the art of loving, offering a hopeful, joyous vision of love's transformative power. It lets us know what we must do to love again. Gathering love's wisdom, it lets us know what we must do to be touched by love's grace.