

Brokenheartedness: Why Is The Heart So Hard To Mend?

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I INTRO

Nietzsche equated spirit with passion, which both Plato and Freud conceive as Eros. My talk this morning is indebted to Freud's observation that unrequited love is the most painful experience any human being can possibly suffer, and the source of virtually all our neuroses. Laing concurred with this observation, and added that brokenheartedness may also occasion psychosis, noting that the word *schizophrenia* literally means "broken hearted" (*schizo* = torn; *phrene* = mind or heart).

Today I want to explore the singular loss of having one's heart broken, why this experience is so painful, and why it is so hard to get over, which is say, to free oneself of the rejection and love again. First I want to say that loss is always painful, whether the loss is due to the death of a love object, or whether the loss is due to having been rejected. I want to argue that recovering from rejection is more problematic than a loss through death. When a loved one dies you know they are never coming back, it is final. But when the lost love is still alive, we invariably harbor a hope that the rejection won't last and that we may be saved by the return of the love object. My talk is intended to explore why this kind of loss is so obstinately impedes acceptance, which is the final step in recovery.

A couple of years ago I gave a paper at an earlier Esalen symposium about the phenomenon of falling in love. I would like to pick up on that thread today by exploring what happens when we experience the tragic loss of a person with whom we fell in love. If, as Fritjof implied, love is essentially spiritual, because it occasions the spirit of life, it follows that losing a love consequently depletes us of spirit, rendering us spirit-less. How long such a condition may persist is impossible to predict. It may last a lifetime, dooming that person to live out their lives hoping that the love object will one day return. Or they may close their hearts to love altogether. Today I want to focus on just why brokenheartedness is so difficult to repair, and the role it plays in our psychopathology. The question I want to explore is: What is it, exactly, that stands in the way of recovery? In my conclusion I will

suggest some of the things we must do in order to embrace such losses and move on.

Love is both the most pleasurable feeling possible, and the most painful experience we can suffer, sometimes resulting in extreme measures, including depression, consternation, homicide, suicide, even madness. What we are capable of feeling about another person is central to both the agony and the ecstasy that love occasions in our lives. Laing himself was obsessed with this topic throughout his lifetime, and he was writing a book about love when he died. Emotions are the consequence of desire, and whenever we desire something or someone, we experience a measure of fear. After all, our desire may be thwarted, or having obtained what we want, there is no guarantee that we can keep it. This is why we regulate our emotions constantly, with drugs, exercise, dreams, fantasies, but most of all with defense mechanisms, which help us mitigate the anguishing experience of disappointment. Freud believed that disappointment is the most painful experience we can bear.

II FALLING IN LOVE

So what are the basic elements of falling in love and why is this experience so wonderful, or potentially heartbreaking? Freud believed that our first love object is our mothers or, in the absence of the woman who gave us birth, the person, man or woman, who assumes the mothering function. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer

to that person as “mother,” and the mother’s partner, who is ordinarily, but not necessarily, the person who helps the mother raise her children, the father, or the Father Function.

There are many kinds of love, but the most basic one is erotic, or sexual love. The Greeks have other names for love, one of which is *Storge*, or family love. Another important type of love is what the Greeks termed *Philia*, what we ordinarily call friendship. Aristotle believed that the *Erotic* is capable of accessing those aspects of love that are inherently giving, sacrificial, and compassionate, but may not endure. You may love passionately but unable to sustain it when difficulties arise. That is because erotic love is for the most part selfish, though it is capable of extraordinary generosity and selflessness. Aristotle developed this aspect of *Eros* and expanded on it further in his conception of *Philia*. Christian love is essentially a synthesis of both *Eros* and *Philia*, a hybrid that St. Augustine called *Caritas*. Today, we consider most successful marriages as sexual friendships, the kind of union that Augustine believed leads to Heaven.

~~During infancy and youth the child is only capable of erotic love. This is why all infants fall madly in love with their mothers. This can be disconcerting to some husbands who suddenly feel that they lost their wives to this newborn, who now has the mother’s total attention. It also helps to explain why some marriages don’t survive after a child has entered the picture. This love is extraordinarily powerful,~~

and persists for a number of years. In the infant's time frame, it can seem a lifetime. Yet, the same child is quite capable of loving others as well, and while the mother continues to occupy a unique and singular role in the child's life, the baby also falls in love with the father. Because we are essentially bisexual creatures, the child moves back and forth from one parent to the other in this inherently polyamorous and incestuous situation that we know of as The Family.

What makes the mother special is that the baby came out of her body, and is customarily, if not always exclusively, nursed by her, providing both nourishment and sexual bliss. Some mothers find it hard to imagine that there is anything remotely sexual about nursing, but for the baby it most certainly is. Freud believed that all experiences of pleasure are sexual in nature, and that we seek sexual satisfaction in one form or another at every moment of our lives. The mouth and genitals are the most sexually charged parts of our bodies. The anus is a third, but less important to some than to others, depending on one's sexual orientation or proclivities. Freud doesn't distinguish between heterosexual and homosexual love because we are bisexual, so it doesn't ultimately matter which sexual orientation we adopt. The experience of brokenheartedness feels the same, whether one or the other, or both.

The infant's relationship to the breast (or substitute) is so pleasurable that it becomes the prototype for adult kissing, oral sex, and eating too much. For some,

kissing is even more erotically exciting than intercourse. The reason this bears going into is because nursing is where we first combine our experience of sexual pleasure and the love we develop for the mother, becoming more or less indistinguishable. This also explains why weaning is such an objectionable experience. By it, the infant is compelled to give up its explicitly sexual relationship with the mother, and obliged to content itself with "mother love." This is where it gets interesting. *Erotic love does not rely on sex in order to be erotic.* All it takes is to be in love. The infant typically explores new love objects polymorphously, loving anyone and everyone who comes into its presence, especially the father. Eventually, the young child, having gone back and forth in its ongoing love affairs with both mother and father, settles on one, and this determines whether the child will subsequently become heterosexual or homosexual. For children with gay parents the situation is more complicated, but the principle remains the same.

III NARCISSISM

So if infants are not yet capable of friendship, this means that all of their attention is focused on obtaining love. Yet they can also be incredibly appreciative of the love they receive, and show it. **Whatever you do, don't confuse this for mature love.** As the infant acquires language and in so doing becomes a child, it is preoccupied with forming a self and deriving all the love it can get for that self in order to feel good. The development of the self in each child turns the child inward and results in self-love: narcissism. The concept of narcissism is crucial for understanding why

we fall in love, yet why some people are incapable of it, or if they are, sustaining it. The theory of narcissism implies that we begin life with two love objects, not one: the mother as well as the infant's gradually burgeoning **self**. Once we develop a self we become obsessed with it and even see the mother as an extension of the royal ME.

So in order to free ourselves to love others we must eventually liberate ourselves from *both*, the incestuous as well as the narcissistic love object. Traditionally, we contrast self-love, the receiving of love from an other, with actively loving another person, the love object. But Freud introduces a third option: narcissistic love. *With this alternative I fall in love with a person modeled on my love for myself.* In the first stage of narcissistic development I fall in love with myself. But in the second stage of narcissism I fall in love, not with myself, but with my **ego ideal**, the person I aspire to be. This is why there is an inevitable tension between the love I get from another person, which is narcissistic, and the love I give to that person, which is submissive, but passionately driven. If I love the other person too much it may deplete my narcissism, which makes me feel unworthy of love. Those with poor self-esteem will be devastated if the love relation is lost, whereas the self-confident person, who knows her or his own worth, will survive to love another day, once their narcissism is restored. Even among the least neurotic individuals, this can take a long time, perhaps longer than that person will live.

Unlike pathological narcissism, which describes a person who is incapable of loving others, healthy narcissism is essential to our ability to fall in love. Without it we would never develop self-love, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-regard, or self-respect. All of these incidents of healthy narcissism are vital to our capacity to *risk* falling in love. And a risk it is, the most extraordinary risk any human being can undertake.

Erotic love is the most prevalent and exciting love any young child has access to for the first five or so years of its life. It isn't until the child goes to school that it enjoys an opportunity to form friendships and to experiment with less erotically charged forms of relationship. But that doesn't mean the erotic component disappears. It is always there in every kind of relation, even the so-called Platonic ones. Simply liking another person is an edition of erotic love. We dislike people because we find nothing attractive about them, or because they find nothing attractive about us. Meanwhile, we yearn for substitutes for the love we derived from our mothers and fathers and make do by falling in love with friends, but without the sexual longing.

So what are the signs of falling in love as we mature and develop? What prompts us to fall in love with this person instead of that one? Why do we have no choice in the matter? Why are we unable to will ourselves to love someone we do not, and cannot stop ourselves from loving someone that we do?

When you fall in love you feel an extraordinary connection with this person, and you cannot bear being separated from them. This is because love seeks proximity. You want to be with this person all the time, because they make you feel happy. In a word, you become obsessed with them. You cannot get them out of your mind. This is a mental way of achieving proximity when you are separated. You are so happy that nothing else matters, or bothers you as much. You don't have a life apart from this person. This love object becomes your life, and your *raison d'être*. Most importantly, you want this love to last . . . forever. Otherwise you would be just as happy to go on to the next person, and the next, which is typical of people who cannot fall in love.

Naturally, such a love thrives in reciprocity. It doesn't work very well if you fall in love with a person who does not fall in love with you. But let's say that the feeling is mutual, and that the two of you are in love with each other. What are the consequences, apart from the happiness you now enjoy? For one thing, your judgement has just gone out the window. Ordinarily, falling in love happens so suddenly and unexpectedly that you hardly know this person. Does that really matter? Well, initially it does not. You are so emotionally invested in keeping this feeling alive that you will overlook just about anything that may stand in the way of committing yourself to this person. God help you! For all you know, you just fell in love with a maniac. But you are the last person to see this, much to the horror of your friends and family. Yes, you must be mad to fall in love. Let's hope you got

lucky and fell in love with someone worthy of your love and devotion. Only time will tell, as you gradually get to know each other and determine just who in the world this person is?

So why do I fall in love with this person instead of that? Why is it necessary that I fall in love with someone I don't really know, someone I will have to get to know over time, in order to determine just who this person is? To answer this question we have to go back to the mother, and the father, and look more closely at just what that first love affair was comprised of. This is because one of Freud's greatest insights was the realization that every finding of a love object is in fact a **refinding** of it. In effect, we fall in love with a person that we were in love with before, but we don't know it. How is this possible?

Once we leave early childhood and enter the latency period, around six or so years of age, our erotic attachment to our mother or father is repressed, and we no longer want to have sex with that parent. Freud insists that the cause of this repression is the child's realization that he or she will never possess the parental love object, the object of the child's desire. This is a heartbreaking experience, our first and, given our helplessness, the worst we will ever experience. This has such an enduring impact on our psyches that every subsequent heartbreak triggers remnants of the first. Moreover, from this period until puberty, our sexual feelings are more or less dormant, but we continue to experience a measure of erotic feelings for other

children. We become obsessed with making friends, children our age who we can both love and be loved by just as we were by our parents. This is a tortuous period during which we fend off our longing for intimacy with aggression and paranoia.

At puberty our sexual feelings return and we direct our attention to potential, non-incestuous love objects of a sexual nature. We seek new objects with whom to fall in love. However, for this to happen two preconditions must be met. First, the new love object must resemble the old, whether the mother or father, though we don't consciously recognize the similarity at the time. The second precondition is that the new love object mustn't be **too** familiar to the original. Otherwise we will experience the guilt that we typically associate with incestuous love objects. Freud believed that guilt is the most prevalent enemy of desire. What are these familiar recognition points comprised of, and where do they originate?

It could be anything. The color of a mother's or father's hair, something about their facial expressions, or laughter, or the sound of their voice. The person that the new love object reminds us of could also be anyone in our early history. Not only the mother or father, but siblings, nursemaids, family friends. You name it. Anyone you were infatuated with and who gave you that special attention that all children crave is fair game.

Obviously, there are many things that can go wrong with this model, otherwise none of us would ever become neurotic. If the attachment to our early parental object was too strong, it may inhibit the choice of a new love object, and we will never fall in love. On the other hand, if the attachment was more subdued, resulting in greater psychic freedom, the adolescent will be more successful in finding new love objects. Happy, healthy love is free of the ambivalence that we associate with neurotic conflict, which is epitomized by the inhibition that prevents us from loving another person wholeheartedly. The most common complaint in psychotherapy patients is that they cannot give themselves completely to another person, or find people who will love them in turn.

There are many reasons why a person is incapable of falling in love or sustaining it, through thick and thin. But our topic today is not what prevents people from falling in love, but how to recover from losing a love object we enjoyed for a period of time. Perhaps the love object was one of those people who cannot sustain love, or perhaps they fell in love with someone else. Whatever the case may be, accepting such a loss and moving on will depend entirely on you, not the lost love object. So what stands in the way of purging ourselves of the longing we continue to have for this person?

IV RECOVERY FROM BROKENHEARTEDNESS

First I want to share two famous quotes that you may have heard before. The first is

“Hope springs eternal,” by Alexander Pope. The second is “He who lives in hope dies in despair,” by George Santayana. Beyond its ubiquitous nature, and its enigmatic quality alluded to by Santayana, what do we really know about hope?

There are many variants to the Pandora myth, which originates in ancient Greece. But the basic idea is that Pandora was created by Zeus as punishment to humankind for Prometheus having stolen fire from the gods. Pandora herself was stunningly beautiful, but she possessed a huge jar, usually mistranslated as a “box,” which contained all the evils and torments of humanity, which she unleashed. These torments include avarice, pride, greed, enmity, envy, and all the other diabolic feelings and infirmities that we have struggled with ever since. The very last item in her jar was hope. This can be interpreted in two ways. The most common is that despite all the anguish we suffer as humans, there is always hope. The other reading, implied by Santayana, is more ambiguous. Sometimes hope is a good thing. It is what typically brings us into therapy. On the other hand, hope may be an impediment to our ability to recognize reality, when it appears in the form of imminent failure, or irretrievable loss. Those are occasions when it is best to abandon hope and give up.

My thesis is that there are three principal impediments to recovering from a broken heart. What gets in the way of our capacity to abandon all hope and accept the

harshest of realities, that the person you desperately love has vanished out of your life?

1) The first impediment is our attachment to the **familiar**, a form of love that the Greeks called *Storge*. Etymologically, family and familiar come from the same Latin root. It is one of the principal ways of loving that often works in concert with erotic, friendly, and other ways of loving. Naturally the family is familiar. But apart from the family, the familiar has a powerful hold over us. The home we dwell in, the bridge we drive over to get to work each day, the restaurants we enjoy revisiting, the city we have lived in most of our lives. All of these things become increasingly familiar to us over time and gradually insinuate their way into our hearts and souls, even when we complain about the traffic, the fires and earthquakes, and the expense of living here. We are loathe to abandon what is familiar to us because it feels like home, and feeling at home is one of the principal sources of happiness.

And yes, familiarity is one of those forms of attachment that explains why many decide to remain in dysfunctional marriages. Though we may no longer be in love we may remain where we are simply because it is familiar. To begin anew entails a radical change to our circumstances. Today, the word attachment has occupied the place that the Greeks called *Storge*.

2) The second impediment we have to contend with is the persistence of the **Self** that was co-created with the person with whom we fell in love, an edition to our Self that must die in order to move on and love again. There is probably no one who understood the precarious nature of this self more than Martin Heidegger, who recognized that there is no fixed self because the self is, by its nature, fluid, elastic, and multifaceted, and always changing. This is why Heidegger distinguished between the authentic self and the *they-self*, which is a self we put on with others who see certain qualities in us that become part of who they take us to be, and which we in turn adopt. There is nothing necessarily pathological in this, so long as we don't lose sight of our authentic self, which refers to the person I genuinely take myself to be.

Heidegger introduced a third kind of self he termed *Mit-Sein* which, roughly translated means **being-with**. This is a more beneficial and potentially authentic kind of self that we co-create with the people we feel closest to. It is epitomized by the phenomenon of falling in love, what I am calling a Co-Constructed Self. Over time, I begin to see myself as the person whom I love sees me, and that person in turn does the same with me. This provides a sense of intimacy and the feeling that this person knows me better than anyone else.

Another component of the **Co-Constructed Self** is that it is partly comprised of the earlier parental imago's that I typically project onto anyone with whom I fall in

love. What makes relationships so complicated is that the so-called person I love and adore is in part a person I invent or create, and in part a person I get to know over time, which would include their authentic self. Whereas *Eros* favors the qualities I project onto others, *Philia* seeks to know that person in their *is-ness*, the person that he or she takes her- or himself to be and that I come to love also, perhaps even more passionately than the qualities I originally projected onto them.

In effect, I am a different person – or Self – with each and every friend and lover I am intimate with. The reason I love some of my friends or love mates more than others is because the ones I most favor have co-generated a Self that I most adore, that I myself most love. In reality, I am only THAT person with the friend or other who co-created me, and it comes most alive when I am with that person.

The person with whom I fall in love has helped me to co-create the Self that I most love, in MYSELF! To lose that person is not only the loss of a person I love and cherish. It is also the loss of the Self – MY Self – that that person helped to invent, but who now no longer values our co-creation, and has rejected it. When the relationship dies, that Co-Constructed Self has to die also, or recede into the background. Otherwise I will try everything in my power to preserve that Self for as long as I can, long after the love object has disappeared.

One of the impediments to allowing my **Co-Constructed Self** to die and to eventually replace it with another **Co-Constructed Self**, but with a new love object, is the **idealization** that I initially projected onto the lost love object. When we fall in love, the other person is also co-constructed by me, once I project onto him or her my own idealized Self, the original source of self-love, without which we are unable to fall in love with anyone. When I fall in love, the other person welcomes my idealized projection and both embraces and celebrates it.

However, when that person no longer idealizes me, I experience an agonizing diminution of my Self and instinctively cling to my idealization of the other person. It's my way of keeping my love for that person alive, while hoping that the goodness that is housed in that idealized image will rescue me from feeling the rejection. Sometimes this feels like one's soul or spirit is slowly dying, victim to a kind of *soul murder*, perpetrated by the lost love object.

That idealization is going to have to die in order for me to finally give up the hope that this relationship can ever be salvaged. This means that as long as I perceive the other person as worthy of my devotion I won't be able to disengage from them and reconstitute my Self with a new love.

3) This now brings us to the problem of hope, and why this is the most intractable impediment to recovering from a broken heart. Why is hope so hard to abandon

and what can we do to facilitate its demise? We resist giving up hope because once we feel hopeless we experience despair. But despair, despite its anguish, is also potentially transformative, and the precondition to letting go.

As Santayana implied, hope can be the driving force in our lives, but it can also serve as the seed to our destruction. Hope is indispensable to the therapeutic process and patients won't get much out of therapy if they don't feel that they have something to gain from it. It is part of the therapist's task to keep that hope alive, even at those moments when it feels that things are, well . . . hopeless. Whenever couples run aground and suffer conflicts and doubts, the hope that they can work things out and persevere depends on their capacity to keep hope alive.

People who are severely depressed have more or less abandoned hope, and these are the most difficult patients to treat. As a rule, pessimists are wary of hope and prefer to expect the worst, as a kind of insurance that the less they hope for the less disappointed they will be. This strategy often turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Optimists tend to be happier, though they are playing a riskier game. Optimists are much more likely to suffer disappointments, but what makes them optimistic is that it has generally worked for them and, more importantly, they tend to treat disappointments and failures more philosophically than the pessimist.

When it comes to recovering from a broken heart, abandoning hope may be especially difficult for the optimist, who tends to feel that things will work out if you only give them time and patience. But the problem remains: just how much time and patience should one invest? This is when hope may not only lead to despair, but psychotic denial that you are in a hopeless situation. So how does one abandon hope when doing so culminates with the collapse of one's world?

By an act of WILL? No. Will is powerless in this situation. It may help us achieve things, but letting go of something is different. The solution goes back to the problem of how we idealize the person with whom we fall in love. That idealization is the last thing to die, because it entails reconceptualizing the person with whom one is in love, and recognizing their faults and limitations, and why you are ultimately incompatible.

All three of these factors – abandoning the familiar, allowing the co-constructed Self to die, and finally, giving up hope – conspire together to help bring us to terms with accepting the most grievous loss possible. This is where therapy can be helpful. Probably half of the people who come to me for psychotherapy or psychoanalysis are in this situation, suffering from unrequited love. It may take years to disentangle the loss of the most recent love object, and how this and other losses trigger the pain and anguish we suffered as children at the loss of our original love object.

If we are lucky, we get through these heartbreaking episodes and learn something from them: how to love even more passionately, suffer the loss when fate has its way with us, and muster the courage to love again. On the other hand, it may be impossible to abandon hope because our love is so strong it will not die. It is always possible that a person who has rejected us will come back, as we hoped they would. But then again, maybe not. If the latter, we will just have to live with it, with a love that we cannot bring ourselves to abandon or consummate. That is the tragic kind of love, to hold onto hope until we die.

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