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by Peter Gray

In Relationships, Respect May Be Even More Crucial than Love

Love is not all you need, nor all your spouse or child needs; consider respect.
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If you were to ask me if my parents loved me, I would, like Tevye and Golda in Fiddler on the Roof, have to pause and think.

In the family I grew up in, love was a term used rather exclusively as the valediction in friendly letters. It was rarely said aloud. We also weren't big on hugging or kissing. It was awkward for me when I left home and entered a different culture, where people regularly hug and kiss at greetings and goodbyes whether or not they actually love one another. I still feel a bit awkward about it.

Praise—sometimes taken to be an expression of love—was likewise nearly absent in the family I grew up in. The self-esteem movement, thank goodness, hadn't yet begun; or, if it had, my parents didn't know about it or didn't approve of it. They would have considered it unseemly to tell me or my siblings that we were wonderful, smart, or

special, and even more unseemly to brag about us to others. In fact, I think my mother had an intuitive understanding of the value of humility and the dangers of pride. She paid no attention to the grades we got in school, seeing them as irrelevant to anything important in life. If I boasted about a grade, which I recall doing on one or two occasions, she would subtly put me in my place by asking me some question about the subject, a question that would make me realize how little I really understood. For example, she might ask, "What is a quadratic equation used for?"

So, back to the question, did my parents love me? What is love? It's a positively valenced term used for things that we feel attached to and fond of. We can love humanity, our country, our dog, money, a new set of clothes, our car, ourselves, our spouse, our children. I don't know how attached my mother and stepfather felt to me. I'm glad they weren't so attached that they had difficulty letting me out of their sight. They certainly cared for me and seemed to enjoy my company. So, yes, I suppose they loved me.

But what I felt most from my parents, for which I was and am most grateful, was respect. When I expressed an idea or asked a question they took it seriously. And as part of respect they trusted me. They seemed to believe that my siblings and I had good judgment and didn't need much watching or advising, even when we were little children. They never said that, they just showed it. And because they respected me, I found it easy to respect them. Because they didn't offer much unsolicited advice, I asked them for advice when I needed it.

I think my parents' beliefs that we were responsible and trustworthy became self-fulfilling prophecies. I have seen many cases, in other families, where the opposite set of beliefs became self-fulfilling prophecies. I have seen kids whose parents loved them enormously—as indexed by the affection and praise showered upon the kids—but didn't seem to respect them. The parents were so attached that they couldn't let go and they paid little attention to their children's real needs, wishes, and

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ideas. They talked down to their children, as if their short stature meant that they were stupid, even though they often told their children how smart they were.

Of course, in any discussion like this, we are to some extent playing with semantics. You might want to define love in such a way that it includes respect, and includes the ability to let go, in which case I would have to agree with you that love trumps everything. But if we define the terms in such a way that love can exist without respect, and respect can exist without love, then I would say that bliss lies in the combination of the two, but if I had to settle for just one or the other I would choose respect.

It is useful, I think, to compare and contrast parent-child relationships with husband-wife relationships. In both of these, respect is absolutely essential for the relationship to work. Love without respect is dangerous; it can crush the other person, sometimes literally. To respect is to understand that the other person is *not* you, not an extension of you, not a reflection of you, not your toy, not your pet, not your product. In a relationship of respect, your task is to understand the other person as a unique individual and learn how to mesh your needs with his or hers and help that person achieve what he or she wants to achieve. Your task is *not* to control the other person or try to change him or her in a direction that you desire but he or she does not. I think this applies as much to parent-child relationships as to husband-wife relationships.

Love brings bliss to both types of relationships, but only if tempered by respect. Love adds joy and provides the emotional bonds that help carry the relationship through hard times. The attachment aspect of love is even more valuable in our relationship with our spouse than in that with our children, because marriage, at least in principle, is forever. My children have moved on, and I had to be prepared for that right from their beginning; but my wife and I will be together until death do us part. It is not unseemly to speak of my wife as my "better half," but it would be unseemly to speak of my child in such terms. Our children do not and should not see themselves as part of us; their job is to move on, beyond us, into a future that we will never know. And if we see them as part of us, we will be torn apart when they leave.

Love is not all you need, nor all your wife or husband needs, and certainly not all your children need. We all need respect, especially from those who are closest and most intimately connected with us.

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And now, what are your responses to this little essay? What have been your family experiences with love, or respect, or the absence of one or the other? If you had to choose just one or the other, which would you choose; or does the the question even make sense? I've read elsewhere of studies indicating that women want love more than respect and men want respect more than love. It fits an old stereotype, but I find it hard to believe. It seems to me that women, even more than men, have suffered when love directed toward them is not accompanied by respect. This blog is a forum for discussion, and your views and knowledge are valued and taken seriously, by me and by other readers.

As always, I prefer if you post your comments and questions here rather than send them to me by private email. By putting them here, you share with other readers, not just with me. I read all comments and try to respond to all serious questions. Of course, if you have something to say that truly applies *only* to you and me, then send me an email.

 

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