

Love and its Obstacles

Preface

Robert Pollack

Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

—C. S. Lewis

What is a University for? Many answers come to mind, all of them true, but none of them the whole truth. Universities are certainly for teaching and learning, for training tomorrow's leaders, and for passing on a cultural heritage; but there are other institutions that can do each of these, perhaps better, and very likely at less cost. What can a university do that no other institution or technology can do better or more cheaply, or both? After a half-century spent at Columbia – certainly an exemplar of the modern American University – I have found that though these justifications do help explain one or another aspect of University life, the one way in which a University may justify itself as unique, is as a laboratory of a sort, for experimentation with ideas.

Universities are – and when they are not, they should ask **themselves** why they are not – safe havens for novelty in the mental world, protected environments for the survival of new ideas that cannot immediately compete with received wisdom of the day, but that may eventually become the new wisdom of a future day. When they function in this capacity, universities need not fear any emergent technologies that might alter their outward appearances or traditional structures.

Since 1999 the Center for the Study of Science and Religion has been, within the Earth Institute at Columbia University, a small novelty in the larger structures of this place, but one that has proven remarkably effective at nurturing new ideas that would otherwise have not easily found a place to be thought through, in the various communities that make up our departments, Schools, Institutes and campuses.

One of the most radical of these new ideas, is the notion that love might have a specific, significant, even central role in the operations and purposes of the university; and that in particular, love might be necessary precisely for the protection of new ideas, if that is indeed the university's core mission. This idea was put to the test a few years back, with the collaboration and support of the Fetzer Institute. Joan Konner and I – she until recently the Dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia and I a former dean of Columbia College – gained the support of Fetzer for a two-year program to test out ways in which the topic of love might find its way into Columbia's far-flung divisions.

Dean Konner describes our efforts in detail in her essay at the end of this book; suffice it here to say that of those efforts, we had one great success and one great failure. The failure was our inability – to date; we have not given up – to gain any support for the

notion that new courses might be offered on the topic, even, eventually, a concentration we called “Love Studies.” Our success was, of course, this Symposium on Obstacles to Love.

We chose the most direct approach to the matter that we could think of: a discourse by experts from many worlds, on why it is so hard for love to exist at all, and in particular why it is so hard for love to thrive at a University like ours. Knowing our own vulnerabilities, we went first to our colleague Dr. Robert Glick, then the Director of the Center for Psychoanalytic Research and Training here, to help us choose the participants. The three of us then chose to wrap this topic up the way a pill is given a candy-coating, by framing it in the most familiar way of spending an academic Sunday, as an all-day Symposium with light refreshments, convened in the most magnificent of our University’s venues, the McKim Mead White-designed Rotunda of the Low Memorial Library.

No one was fooled. The day was intense, and our speakers were themselves exemplars of their topics. Doctors Ethel Person and Otto Kernberg each bore no accidental resemblance to the kind of parent few of us have had but all of us have wished for or wished to be, as they explained with clarity the traps of self-love, and the paradoxical necessity for both autonomy and vulnerability to be present in people, for love to emerge between them.

Jeffrey Sachs and Sharon Olds then became the brother and sister we all wish we had: as different in discipline as any economist and poet ever could be, but still equally clear on the risks of self-satisfaction, and equally vulnerable themselves to the burdens of age and circumstance.

And finally, as if to model the necessity for us all, of a love object not only beyond our own separate selves but also beyond death itself, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz and Reverend James Forbes Jr. flattened the hills and filled the valleys of this discourse, by preaching in their own distinctive ways, on the difficulties – the impossibility in rational terms but the necessity nevertheless in religious terms – of sustaining love in the face of death and suffering.

I am proud to have been able at last to see their work that day emerge – with the collaboration of Kate Wittenberg and Ann Miller of EPIC, the web-development center of University's Libraries – as this novel publishing adventure. I trust that after you have read this volume, you will understand, as I have learned from this and other CSSR programs, how essential it is that a University remain a laboratory for the incubation of ideas, not least of them the idea that love is essential to the lasting value of any relation between any two people or, more to the point, between the Self and an Other.