

## Introductory Remarks

Robert Pollack, Joan Konner, and Robert Lehman

*Robert Pollack.* What is this symposium really about, and why are we here today? My first answer is very simple: Love is a moral value; it's also a great slogan. The problem, of course, is that like all slogans, it lacks nuance. Selfless love of the stranger is a moral value for sure, but is self-love a moral value? Love of the family, yes, but love of the familiar? How about love of other species, even at the expense of our own?

The problem with nuance is that it bores people. The purpose of this symposium is to work against that boredom, so that we and the academic world in the largest sense may begin to renew ourselves as a voice worth listening to. If love is a moral value—and I think it is—then the success of this symposium will be in finding a way for this university to discuss moral values, by transcending the current paradigm of loveless objectivity that has gone so far in making our voices irrelevant to so many people.

Earlier this week I received the following e-mail from a woman named Monica Venlarby at the European University in Frankfurt-am-Oder, a small city in what had been East Germany. She writes:

Dear Mr. Pollack,

Ever since my six-year-old daughter told me that should she ever study it would be only love, I am set on the goal to establish that possibility for her. I have twelve years to do so. I have found an announcement on your home page that you too are thinking about how such a curriculum could look like, and, as I am just at the beginning of my search, I was hoping you could help me with as many contacts as you can think of, people who are already involved in the study of love in their own fields, and ideally also

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people who do not only study love but also love their study.

I'm reading this to you all now not only because I'd like to help this woman get started with as many contacts as possible, but also because she has found exactly the right words to describe Joan Konner, professor and dean emerita of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism—a person who not only studies love but also loves her study.

*Joan Konner.* Thank you, Bob, and thank you all. In a time of polarization in our country and in the world, this conference is a call to commonality, a call to what brings us together, not what tears us apart. It's fitting that it takes place on a Sunday, a day we are accustomed to setting aside for acknowledgment and reflection on the mystery and wonder of being alive. It is also fitting that a symposium concerning our better angels, bedeviled though they may be, should invade the sacred Sabbath space, especially in these times. For so many of us today our lives are too busy, too noisy, too stressed and pressured even to think, much less contemplate, or meditate, or pray. It is also fitting that it should take place on this Sunday, the Sunday after a presidential election that assaulted us with the most contentious, hypocritical, and degrading political dialogue we have experienced in our lifetime.

This symposium is the finale of a two-year-long project at Columbia University exploring the possibility of bringing the subject of love into the curriculum of the university. We were able to do this under the aegis of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion, directed by Robert Pollack, professor of molecular biology in the Department of Biological Sciences and former dean of Columbia College, and with the financial support of the Fetzer Institute. Professor Pollack and I joined in this project together with Dr. Robert Glick, director of the Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research at Columbia University's medical school. Our work has involved a series of University Seminars with speakers who brought different perspectives, knowledge, and insights to the subject of love through their various disciplines. The seminars were attended by individuals from all over the campus, with almost every school being represented, as well as by individuals from other universities and communities, from the United Nations, and from religious

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organizations, and by artists and others.

The Fetzer Institute is unique among the larger foundations in the country. Located in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the Institute works to bring our deepest spiritual intentions into the outer world of action. It does so through partnerships in education and science, in health, in politics, public affairs, law, philanthropy, and more. The foundation believes that people who are most aware of and connected to their inner core of human values will act through their lives and work to create a more compassionate world. The foundation seeks to cultivate love and forgiveness as a path to transformation in ourselves and throughout the world.

I have the pleasure of introducing Robert Lehman, president of the Fetzer Institute from 1989 to 2000, and the man who inspired the Institute to express what it believes a world in turmoil and distress needs most today: love and forgiveness.

*Robert Lehman.* Joan did a wonderful job in describing the Fetzer Institute, so I don't think I'll elaborate on that, other than telling a couple of stories about John Fetzer, its founder. John Fetzer died about twelve years ago at age ninety. In his last decade of life, his ninth decade, he sold everything he owned, which was quite a bit—a number of television stations and radio stations, and also the Detroit Tigers. He put the proceeds into the foundation called the Fetzer Institute, to look at three things, he said: the wholeness of reality; freedom of spirit; and unconditional love. I was with him, as the new president of the institute, during the last year or two of his life, and he never explained to me what those words meant. I've come to learn that the role of the Fetzer Institute is to find out what those words can mean in our culture today.

John Fetzer did say one thing that I think is very pertinent for the meeting today. He said, "You know, I believe the human capacity to love is only at its earliest stages of development, only at its most rudimentary stages of development." A man of age ninety was able to say that. Obviously there's a lot of evidence around us that love is at an early stage of development, but we don't think of the other side of that, that in fact there are things we can do; we can learn better how to love and forgive in the world today. That was very much what his mission was about, and it's been a privilege over these years to work on it.

I came across a sentence recently in volume 9 of *The Encyclopedia of Religion*: "The idea of love has left a wider, more

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indelible imprint upon the development of human culture in all its aspects than any other single notion.” When we hear that sentence, our tendency is to say “of course.” But on the other hand, the Love Studies Project at Columbia is a rare example of our culture recognizing the importance of that statement, the importance of love. So it’s exciting to be part of this program and institution that’s beginning to explore the power of love in our culture and how our culture might learn more effective ways to love and forgive.

The Love Studies Project came out of a small group at Fetzer, about seven people. It was staffed by Kate Olsen, who’s here today; Joan Konner served in the group; Larry Sullivan, the former president of the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions; two or three of our trustees; and myself. The group found that its name was to be the Love Group (not to be confused with “group love” at all). We worked for about two years to envision how Fetzer’s new mission might focus on this subject of love and forgiveness. That group has spawned several projects, including this one and an exciting PBS program, which Al Perlmutter may produce and Joan Konner direct, on the subject of love, the challenges of love, and the history of love in our culture.<sup>1</sup> We’re excited about that project, which is just now in its early stages of development.

Finally I would like to thank you all for coming here and being part of this meeting and discussion today, which it is a great pleasure for the Fetzer Institute to sponsor.

## Notes

1. The finished program, *The Mystery of Love*, aired on PBS on December 13, 2006.