

We are all searching for just one thing in life: to find fulfillment, to receive a kiss of light on our gray hearts, to know the sweetness of a love that will not fade. (Christian Bobin)

No writer is as emblematic of the American twentieth century as Susan Sontag. She left a legacy of writing that forms an indispensable key to modern culture. She was there when the Cuban revolution began and when the Berlin Wall came down; she was in Vietnam under American bombardment, in wartime Israel, in besieged Sarajevo.

No writer negotiated as many worlds; no serious writer had as many glamorous lovers. There is something Olympian about her sex life, claims her biographer (Benjamin Moser). “How many American women of her generation had lovers as numerous, beautiful, and prominent?” One famous and very wealthy lover was also extremely generous, giving Susan at least eight million dollars over the course of their relationship.

Yet, she never felt appreciated, loved, not in relationship with her many lovers, not in relationship with her mother, not in her brief marriage, not in relationship with her son. She grew more and more insulting toward the people who did love her. Despairing of love she drove off or deprecated those who tried to love her.

The head of publicity for her book publisher once mentioned her to his psychiatrist, and the doctor burst out laughing. “You can’t imagine how many people have sat on that couch over the years and talked about Susan Sontag.”

She was brilliant, beginning her studies at Berkeley, graduating from the University of Chicago (BA) and Harvard University (MA). Some of her professors mused that she was better read than they. As brilliant as she was, the idea of love as an expanding art eluded her. She seemed to think you only have a finite amount of love, if you give love, you have less for everybody else and less for yourself.

According to her biographer, Susan could be unsparing with herself, but the focus was always on herself. In a letter to her sister, she described pledging her son not to marry until he was forty and then to take an apartment in the same building as her. “I want none of this new fangled emancipation from mamma that the psychiatrists are preaching to the heathen.”

She was persuaded, at least for a time, of her husband’s idea of love. Love meant *possession* of the other; the other can be an extension of your personality. Love incorporates the other, devours even, and cuts the tendons of the will. As off-putting as that sounds, remember the vow of obedience extracted from women in the old wedding ceremonies.

Mary Oliver has a better idea. Love's greatest gift is to be enthralled that the other person has a life—courteous, intelligent—that I wonder about more than I wonder about my own; that they have a soul—their own, no one else's—that I wonder about more than I wonder about my own; so that I find my soul clapping its hands for their's more than my own.

What Mary Oliver identifies is the first sign of love, or the first step in the adventure of love: namely, joy in the presence of another person, delight in the existence of another. Joy is the lifeblood of love. Joy has an element of being seized by the reality and wonder of another. Joy always involves some loss of self, from the parent reveling in the autonomous existence of her child to the contemplative lost in religious ecstasy.

This joy in the existence of another leads, naturally, to gratitude for the life of the other. While joy can never be grasped, gratitude is emotionally stabilizing; while we are surprised by joy, gratitude is a practice of perceiving the good in another. Gratitude takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to the wonder of the other. Gratitude knows every breath, every moment, is grace.

The third sign of true love is reverence. Reverence pays attention which takes time and patience. Reverence desires to know and to be known, and acknowledges the mystery that transcends knowing. Reverence honors vulnerability. Reverence respects boundaries and makes genuine intimacy possible. Reverence neither dominates nor tolerates domination. Before the body and soul of the lover reverence sings, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

The fourth step in the adventure of love is fidelity, commitment to the welfare of the other. In the language of the gospel, it is to love *just as* Jesus loved—meaning, in the extreme, being willing to die for the other. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13 NABRE) In the dailiness of life, it means remaining faithful in and through the inevitable changes and challenges every relationship knows.

To know the sweetness of a love that will not fade, our joy in the other must be nurtured in gratitude, matured in reverence, and guarded by fidelity. Such love makes us fully human.

BENEDICTION

May the love of the God of life

 May the grace of the Christ of love

 May the peace of the Spirit of holiness

Go with you now and evermore.