

The Physics of Love

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I

The universe is expanding. This is not a conclusion drawn from my own thought. I've seen figures and watched some documentaries, but effective understanding remains elusive. In my layman, poetically-skewed mind, the closest I can come to expressing the concept is that everything in the universe is ultimately measurable. And the universe is expanding.

II

Early in the year 2008, while making my home in the Appalachian mountain town of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, a realtor named Janice became a central figure in my world. We were both in what some call "middle age." We had each spent time in the deep well of life, and being together created a spark of light that provided a clear vision of where we wanted to go. Our apprenticeship in the art of living was over; now we could, and would, experience life together.

Initially our budding friendship centered on long hikes in the Smokies and intimate chats on the back porch of my little mountain cottage. There were no boundaries on topics; though age brought caution, a deep trust quickly set in between us. We came to know each other, and the trust was never betrayed. Then, for reasons unrelated to our relationship, I relocated to Pittsburgh, 500 miles to the north. We had no expectations of our future together, and we understood the realities of geographic shifts. There was sadness but no tears at the news.

One morning we took a long hike together near a mountain river. We stopped by a small waterfall, the sort that seems to just drip its way to a larger stream somewhere below. Sitting on a moss-covered boulder, we ate peanut butter and honey sandwiches and sipped bottled spring water. As we absorbed the moment, a folded piece of paper was pulled from my hip pocket. The text printed on the page was "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats. I read the poem in my best possible voice, and then handed her the sheet as a gift. Clearly moved by the gesture, she held the poem in her hands until we prepared to resume our hike, at which point she carefully refolded the paper and placed it in the outside pouch of her small hiking bag.

Later that day my car drove north without her. We didn't know when or if we would see each other again, but it didn't feel like goodbye. Driving through West Virginia, my beat-up Cutlass Olds pulled over at the New River Gorge, a beautiful vista spanned by a magnificent single-arch bridge. Standing on an overlook with the wind blowing through my hair and the cellphone showing a single bar, I called Janice in what would be the first of our daily telecommunication. Email also provided frequent and instant access. No thought was too small to send to her inbox. From a technological perspective, 500 miles felt like next door.

Monthly visits became an immediate routine. We wanted each other's company, but we were not desperate. We grew individually; we grew together. As the year passed, we knew. Because my

teenaged son Paul was in my care and Janice was living alone in a small apartment, it was decided — by all three of us — that she would join us in our Pittsburgh home. With that settled, I drove a fully-loaded, 26-foot rental truck through the mountains in a February snowstorm, and, after shoveling our way through two feet of snow, placed her earthly possessions forever alongside mine.

Now Janice and I were unquestionably committed to spending our lives together, as the phrase goes, until parted by death. We shared a love that was complete in ways neither of us had previously believed could truly exist. And it was uniquely ours even as it brought us into contact with an awareness of a source of love in which we were like two tiny drops of water merging with a vast spiritual ocean.

Then, about a year after sharing a home together in simple-hearted contentment, Janice underwent emergency brain surgery to remove what turned out to be the product of stage four cancer. During her two-month stay in the hospital, we were married in a bedside ceremony. A few days after that event we were able to come home and live as husband and wife for three weeks. We had stayed side-by-side through it all with neither of us questioning that we were one. And then we were parted by death.

My grief spiraled into places that are indescribable. For two years I was shattered inside; the saving grace — and I choose those words carefully — was love. My love for her, her love for me, and the greater love from which all nourishment springs. Love. That much was all I knew; everything else about my life was defined by mental breakdown and raw survival.

After a year or so, I tried dating, mainly just going out to dinner or for the occasional afternoon walk. Eventually a comfort with casual companionship returned, but any hint of intimacy stirred feelings of betrayal. I didn't want anything to invade my life with Janice, even though now I was alone.

Then, unexpectedly, fresh sunlight filled my lungs. Social media had been a daily diversion for a few years, mostly in the form of sharing poetry and other bits of art with like-minded folks. Occasionally I shared my own writing, but mostly I shared the work of others — especially those poets whose work was providing me with comfort. Sometimes I would just post an image from a favorite painter, a piece of music, or an old photograph. It was a way of feeling connected, and frequently the posts initiated discussions from people, many of whom were only known to me as a name and photo on a computer screen.

In this process a poet named Virginia entered my world, and a spark of recognition ignited a special friendship. She lived in Woodstock, Illinois, 500 miles to the west. We chatted. We corresponded. We made full use of the electronic possibilities of communication at our disposal — or at least those means which we had managed to figure out in our old-world ways. We talked of favorite books and writers, and we read poems to each other over the phone. Sometimes we discussed the poems; mostly we just went where the poems took us. We were becoming one.

Virginia and I began building the foundation for a life together — brick by brick, thought by thought, feeling by feeling. New territory was being entered, and we both carried fresh wounds

and scars of lives lived. But our shared middle-aged intuition was keen; we were aware of what we were doing.

As we grew closer, we were trusting in each other without being naïve. We were artists drawn to the art and love of the other; we knew the hazards. When I suggested that the true test would be how well our individual neuroses meshed, we shared a laugh even as we acknowledged the accuracy of the notion. Our eyes were as open as our emotions, and we were relieved to find early on that our characters were well-balanced, and, most importantly, we were each open to the perception of the other. Otherwise, we simply let love take the lead.

Finding one's self in true comfort with another is pure enlightenment. Being able to share an awareness of what transcends the physical while simultaneously helping each other move through the world is an ideal. That's the path Virginia and I began to forge for ourselves. Although initially I did have to confront the nagging feeling that I was "cheating" on my life of love with Janice, I also felt a sense of approval from that love — a sense that the love shared then was the foundation for the love being experienced in the "now." And in time the now took over.

Virginia and I were married in a quiet courthouse ceremony in Woodstock and happily shared a home — happily in ways we would not have understood previous to the joining of our paths. We are now deeply and joyously committed to spending our lives together until our union is completed by death.

Still, the past remains a part of me, and sometimes I find myself returning to the time before a brain tumor changed my life forever. One afternoon I was unpacking a box that had sat in the basement for several months. Among the items inside was a small hiking pack, the sort that is slung over the shoulder for short hikes. In the outside pouch was a neatly folded piece of typing paper with "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats printed on it. Reading the poem slowly and silently, the sound of a trickling mountain stream and the taste of peanut butter and honey filled my senses.

In such moments the love I felt in 2008 and the loss I felt in 2011 are very much alive, which briefly confuses my awareness of today. But then I breathe and remember that the love for Janice that sprouted in 2008 never stopped; the physical relationship stopped. And my love for Virginia is very much alive and growing in the present world. The greater love from which all nourishment springs continues to flow.

III

Completely without doctrine or formula I have stumbled upon a scientific observation: love defies the theory of relativity. Love is immeasurable. And my love is expanding. Fortunately, the search for deep intellectual understanding is increasingly supplanted by simple awareness. Life is an ongoing conundrum, but the saving grace — and I use that phrase carefully — is love.