

Bittersweet Eros

by Jacqueline Wright

*My name is Love, supreme my sway,
The greatest god and greatest pain,
Air, earth, and seas, my power obey,
And gods themselves must drag my chain.*

*In every heart my throne I keep,
Fear ne'er could daunt my daring soul;
I fire the bosom of the deep,
And the profoundest hell control.*

—Miquel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part II, Chap XX



Etienne Maurice-Falconet, *Cupid*, 1757

I have become increasingly aware that most of the people who walk into my consulting room for therapy do so because of difficulties in loving and being loved. The problem appears dressed in many guises such as an absence of love, an impossible or humiliating love, an unrequited or lost love, an impossible triangle, or an addiction to love, to name a few. I see the same difficulty reflected in modern society, in a general lack of connection and relatedness. Yet one glance at the books and magazines in our bookstores reveal our obsession with the topic of love. We are told how to find love, how to keep love, whom to love and when to love. We bemoan its absence, complain about its quality and suffer from its power over us. It fascinates and captivates us, yet seems to bring our greatest pain.

The word love and Eros are often used interchangeably. Unfortunately, the word love has become both loaded and demeaned through use. Eros is an even more abstract term for most people and we see a similar degeneration in its representation. I believe that a closer look at the god Eros may provide some illumination and understanding about why we experience so much suffering with love.

Called “the first-born and fairest of the gods,” Eros personifies desire and the force that brings things together. There are actually two Greek myths about Eros. Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, tells us that Eros arose out of Chaos. He describes him as being that love which softens the heart and whose fructifying

influence would henceforth preside over the formation of beings and things. Later myths claim that Eros was born from the union of Aphrodite and Ares, the goddess of beauty and love and the god of war. Eros was represented as an undisciplined and mischievous child who created havoc with his arrows. He did not grow as other children did, and Aphrodite, out of her concern for his health and growth, consulted the oracle Themis. The oracle replied that love couldn’t grow without passion. The answer to the problem came to Aphrodite through the birth of another son, Anteros. His name means “answering love” and he is known as the god of passion. The story goes that Eros would start relationships and then Anteros would initiate a dialogue that permitted the relationship to continue on a deeper level. When Anteros was with his brother, love grew and flourished, but when he was separated from him, Eros returned to his mischievous habits.

This great god of primordial energy and desire has evolved over time into the cherubic, insipid figure of Cupid, whose image appears on greeting cards, in trite logos and sappy depictions of love. In our modern society, Eros remains a winged child who causes people to fall in love by penetration of his arrows and for the most part, he is not even recognized as a god. Originally identified with creative power, he has been reduced to the merely erotic and is now associated with gratification and sexuality. We are reminded here of Jung’s characterization of neurosis as a god who has been wounded. Jung viewed the gods as dramatizations of particular archetypal energies and recognized that it was man’s estrangement from the gods within that caused considerable suffering.

Jung considered Eros the “principle of relationship,” the capacity to form relationships based on love and desire. In his

Jacqueline Wright, Ed.D., will be our speaker in November. See program description on page 2 for complete biography.

acknowledgment of Eros in a last passage of his biography at the end of his life he says: “Eros is a *kosmogonos*, a creator and father-mother of all higher consciousness... it might well be the first condition of all cognition and the quintessence of divinity itself. ...A man is at its mercy. He may assent to it, or rebel against it; but he is always caught up by it and enclosed within it.” (CW 16:444)

Eros has a destructive as well as creative power and can be both cruel as well as tender. Sappho, the ancient Greek poet who infused her works with intense emotions, was the first to call Eros “**bittersweet**”, describing him as charming and very beautiful, yet cruel to his victims. Many lovers might heartily echo and validate such sentiments. The convergence of Eros, which often comes with great intensity, creates contradiction and paradox because it brings both pleasure and pain. That is why it has been written: “... the Love-god, golden-haired, stretches his charmed bow with twin arrows, and one is aimed at happiness, the other at life’s confusion.” (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 549) This contradictory and paradoxical nature is the most striking feature of Eros.

Eros is often felt as an assault from outside oneself. Descriptive phrases associated with Eros such as melting, piercing, singeing, grinding to a powder, poisoning, biting, crushing, roasting or stinging suggest a feeling of being invaded or taken over by the forces of Eros, which stirs fear. Fear seems an inherent and important part of the Eros experience. Actually, it can be a form of wise counsel in the matters of love by tempering the exhilaration of the Eros experience. Fear helps us become aware of Eros’ intentions and keep us from being swept away by its overwhelming power. The individual’s vulnerability to erotic influence is symbolized by Eros’ wings, which suggest that he has the power to take control of a lover and carry him away at any moment. Desire can take over the entire personality, causing a person to ride over the demands and wishes of others. Creative persons can also be seized by what Plato called divine madness. Trusting and doubting, yielding and denying, opening and closing, are all part of the experience of Eros. Each one brings the other into being. Psychic development proceeds through prolonged experiences of love, its ups and downs, its needs and desires, its sudden shifts, frustrations and deceptions.

Eros creates desire, which is always poised on an axis of paradox. Sappho perceived desire as a three-part structure: lover, beloved and that third component that comes between them. They are three parts of transformation, electrified by desire. The third component plays a paradoxical role because it both connects and separates, illuminating the absence whose presence is Eros. This component suggests a mystery, something transcendent and beyond opposites. The lover wants what he does not have, and as soon as it’s had, it is no longer wanting. This is the dilemma within Eros. (Anne Carson, *Eros*, p. 16) We can observe this process being played out in triangular situations that are often unconsciously created in order to awaken Eros or a dead relationship. Plato, in his dialogues, explores this theme saying that desire can only be for what is lacking, what is not present. Whoever desires what is not gone?

What is often depicted as the moment of ideal desire by vase painters as well as poets is not the moment when the beloved’s arms open to the lover, or the moment when the lovers embrace in happiness. Rather, what is pictured is the moment of pursuit, or when the beloved flees. These depictions portray an

erotic tension that sets the interval between the two figures vibrating. Such scenes offer evidence that Eros deferred or obstructed is the preferred subject.

Keeping the differences visible is the subterfuge role of Eros. The lover’s delight is in reaching, and many tactics may be used to sustain desire and desirability. Observe the endless parade of love stories devoted to keeping the lovers apart and miserable until the very end. They either fall in love with someone else, a rival lover appears, a series of misfortunes keep them apart or they must confront overwhelming obstacles, only to be reunited in the end. Fulfillment is always just out of reach. A classic example can be seen in the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, when Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks come within seconds of missing each other at the end. There are many ways to triangulate and sustain this powerful space. Letters, fleeting or flirtatious glances, and spoken innuendoes all function as conduits of erotic charges, kindling the emotions and keeping the space of desire open.

Desire also engages every lover in an activity of the imagination. The space across which desire reaches creates and defines boundaries between self and other, between what is there and what is not there. In reaching for an object that appears to be beyond or outside oneself, the lover is forced to notice what is missing. The desire is for something that he never knew he lacked. The imagination calls up possibilities beyond the actual and all at once a self never known before comes into focus. It is a vision of a different, more enlarged and complete self. The actual self and the ideal self and the difference between them connect in one triangle momentarily. We have all experienced this sense of enlargement that occurs when we fall in love. Fal-



Antoine-Denis Chaudet, *Cupid*, 1802-1807

ling in love makes one feel genuinely alive. Everything seems clearer, grander, and more possible. Great certainty is felt about oneself and about the beloved. This is the point where the reality of what we are disappears into the possibility of what we could be. This enlargement can even seem like a ridiculous inflation to those around us. Every lover wants to feel this current of Eros, although we both love and hate that moment because it invariably brings an experience of lack as well as fullness. But we have to keep coming back to it if we wish to maintain contact with the possible in ourselves.

This is the mechanism that originally shapes the notion of self in each of us, according to developmental theorists. In the beginning, there is no awareness of objects as distinct from one's own self. Consolidation of a self occurs as the child begins to distinguish between self and not self, to discover where self ends and the other begins. If love's course is barred and fails to reach its fulfillment, then it acquires a particularly strong hold over the person. Hillman reminds us that all childhood wounds are wounds of love and are usually felt as abandonment. He refers to "one's swollen reservoir of love unwanted, without adequate or permitted recipients. The wounds of love stunt the psyche..." (Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis*, p. 61). James Hollis, in his book *The Eden Project*, reminds us of our need to become conscious of these Eros wounds. Since our behavior flows psychologically out of a desire to treat our original wounds, they can usually be discerned from the patterns of our relationships. Each wounding experience evokes Eros, which sends us on our journey to healing by replicating our earlier wounding. And it is through the childlikeness of loving that we find that healing.

This is also the mechanism that occurs in analysis through transference. It is related to the projective faculty of the psyche that causes the analysand to project onto the analyst all the qualities of which she is not aware of in herself. In analysis, this process arises in spite of a determination on the part of the analysand not to let it happen. Analysis is a mythical enactment of an archetypal pattern and the emotions that arise are necessary and belong to that mythical pattern. Eros, as initiator and psychopomp both leads the way and is the way itself. We can only know ourselves through another. We need intimate relationships in which Eros can move freely, whether it is in analysis, marriage, family or between lovers and friends.

The awakening of the soul through love is a recurrent theme in myth, art and folk tales. This theme is most vividly portrayed in Apuleius' tale of *Eros and Psyche*, a myth I find myself returning to again and again. The myth is not the usual tale of the hero who must leave home and make his way in the world. Instead, it is a tale of relationship, one that calls us to awaken to a deeper capacity for loving. It portrays the need of the soul for love and the need of Eros for psyche.

In the myth, Psyche is initially presented as an innocent and infantile girl who is destined to live an impoverished life until the god Eros intervenes. He rescues her and takes her to a magical place, to a realm she never knew existed. This magical place suggests that intermediary world of imagination that opens to us when Eros enters. This is where the erotic quickening occurs that sends Psyche on her true initiatory journey. But the story reminds us that we cannot stay in the world of imagination and reflection forever. There is a time to shine a light on our fantasies and projections. When Psyche shines the light on Eros, it suggests the unconscious veil has been penetrated.

When that happens, both Psyche and Eros are affected. Eros disappears and the broken connection has to be redeemed through Psyche's suffering, which calls forth archetypal powers. Psyche is awakened through her suffering of the absence of Eros.

The ancient Greek word *psyche* means "butterfly," a creature that undergoes a long period of metamorphosis in the chrysalis state before awakening is possible. The maturation of the soul unfolds through the lure of Eros. The myth teaches us that without the prick of Eros, the containment of the imaginal realm he creates and experiences of erotic destruction, the psyche remains virginal and infantile. An example of a virginal psyche can often be seen in someone who is fascinated with dreams and visions but is caught in constant reflecting. Transformation begins in imagination and reflection but requires a move forward into the possibilities that have been imagined. Reflection is not enough. Psyche needs embodiment. Eros provides the impetus for this movement by bringing a passion and desire for a fuller and richer life.

According to Plato, Eros doesn't just have to do with our relationships to people, but with all interactions, both inner and outer, to nature and to spirit. Eros has to do with intentions of the Self. As individuals, we need to be willing to suffer the bitterness as well as the sweetness that Eros brings. The god's wondrous beauty needs to be seen and known, which can only occur through our own personal suffering and sacrifice. This is not neurotic suffering, but suffering in service to the Self. Our awakening begins with our yearning to "be in touch" with each other and with our sense of how "out of touch" we are with our archetypal roots. Eros gives the soul this yearning ■



Caravaggio, *Amor Vincit Omnia*, 1601