

What Is "Love"?

Defining love in a way that's useful is difficult. In the English language we are handicapped due to a word shortage when saying, "I love this " or "I love that." For instance, you can use the word "love" to describe your feelings about your mother, your spouse and your favorite flavor of ice cream.

- "I love you, mom!"
- "I love you, dear!"
- "I love chocolate ice cream!"

When the same word can be used to express your feelings about relationships and about a favorite dessert, it's easy to see how the meaning of the word "love" could be cheapened.

When it comes to finding a useful definition of love, I like the one given by Scott Peck in his book *The Road Less Traveled*. In searching his experience and in analyzing his clinical practice, the meaning of love that seems to ring true for him is this: "The will to extend yourself for your own or another person's spiritual growth." That's an uncomplicated, yet dynamic definition of the word.

Note first that this definition of love involves self-love. This is an absolute necessity. You are only able to love other humans if you're able to love yourself as a human. It's as important to spend time developing a deeper love for yourself as it is to love others. You can't give away what you don't have.

"Extend" implies effort. Love becomes visible through your effort. It's more than words; it means going the proverbial extra mile. Talking about love isn't love. Reading about love isn't love. Taking the time and expending the effort to love is love.

"Will" is desire of such intensity that it's translated into action. Will implies choice. You're not forced to love. Whether you act lovingly or unlovingly, those actions are your choice. You have chosen, consciously or unconsciously, to act as you have. "I intended to" isn't love. Nor is "I didn't mean to do that" when you've done an unloving thing.

This definition implies that love is a process of growth. As you grow, you are better able to understand love, grow as a lover and grow in your capacity to love.

This definition implies that there are some things that may look like love which are not. There are some actions which may be labeled as loving which are in fact less than loving. You may remember with loving affection things you did or that your parents did which upon further review aren't loving at all. Consider these--

- My mother loved me so much that she wouldn't let me date until I was in college. She couldn't stand to see me get hurt.
- My father loved me so much that he never complimented me. He told me that if he praised me, I would get the big head.
- My grandmother loved me so much that she never let me do things for myself. She was afraid I would hurt myself, so she never let me even put a piece of bread in the toaster.
- My father loved me so much that he worked two jobs. He was seldom at home and when he was, we had to be really quiet so he could get his rest.
- I love my wife so much that I have to have her around all the time. It hurts me that she wants to go out with her friends. I worry that she'll be hurt when she's away, so if she does go out, I encourage her to come straight home so we can be together.

These stories point out the fact that there are some things that love is not. Calling an action or attitude "loving" doesn't make it loving. In the final analysis, love is known by it's fruit.

Jeff Hood