



Love and Longing: The Feminine Mysteries of Love *Published in Personal Transformation, Summer 1999*

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*The pain of love became the medicine for every heart,
The difficulty could never be solved without love.*

— 'ATTAR

Love is the most powerful force in the universe, and for centuries mystics have understood the transformative potential of divine love. Love draws us back to love, love uncovers love, love makes us whole and love takes us Home. In the depths of the soul we are loved by God. This is the deepest secret of being human, the bond of love that is at the core of our being. And yet we have forgotten this essential nature of our being; we are hidden from our own deepest love. The mystical path is an uncovering of this love, an awakening to our own capacity to love and be loved.

Like everything that is created, love has a dual nature, positive and negative, masculine and feminine. The masculine side of love is "I love you." Love's feminine quality is "I am waiting for you; I am longing for you." For the mystic it is the feminine side of love, the longing, the cup waiting to be filled, that takes us back to God. Longing is a highly dynamic state and yet at the same time it is a state of receptivity. Because our culture has for so long rejected the feminine we have lost touch with the potency of longing. Many people feel this pain of the heart and do not know its value; they do not know that it is their innermost connection to love.

Longing is the sweet pain of belonging to God. Once longing is awakened within the heart it is the most direct way Home. Like the magnet it draws us deep within our own heart where we are made whole and transformed. This is why the Sufi mystics have always stressed the importance of longing. The great Sufi Ibn 'Arabî prayed, "Oh Lord, nourish me not with love but with the desire for love," while Rûmî expressed the same truth in simple terms, "Do not seek for water, be thirsty."

The feminine mystery of longing belongs to the nature of the soul which is always feminine before God. In the innermost chamber of the heart we look towards God, receptive and attentive, needing God's nourishment. The mystic knows that only God can make us whole, only God can heal the sickness of the soul. The ninth-century mystic Râb'ia, who was one of the first Sufis to stress the importance of devotional love, expressed this mystical truth:

The source of my grief and loneliness is deep in my breast.
This is a disease no doctor can cure.
Only union with the Friend can cure it.

The heart longs for God, and seeks to find its true Beloved. If we follow our longing, if we allow ourselves to be pierced by the pain of separation from the source, we will be drawn back to God.

Longing is the central core of every mystical path, as the anonymous author of the fourteenth-century mystical classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, simply states: "Your whole life must be one of longing." Yet our present Western society is so divorced from this mystical thread that underlies every spiritual path that we have no context within which to appreciate the nature of the heart's desire for Truth. There are many people who feel the unhappiness of a homesick soul and yet do not know its cause. They do not realize the wonder of their pain, that it is their heart's longing that will take them Home.

A friend had a simple and powerful dream in which she was alone in a landscape howling at the moon. There was no reply, no answer to the anguish of her calling, and when she awoke she felt a

failure. She had called out and there had been no answer. But the tradition of lovers has long known that our calling is the answer, our longing for Him is His longing for us—"it is You who calls me to Yourself." The longing of the heart is the memory of when we were together with our Beloved. The pain of separation is our awakening to the knowledge that somewhere we are united with God.

Longing draws us from separation back to union, from our fragmented sense of self to the deeper wholeness of our true being. The longing of the heart is the sign of the deepest fulfillment, and yet it terrifies the mind because it does not belong to this world. There is no visible lover, no one to touch or to control. It is a love affair of essence to essence that was born before the beginning of time. Sadly, we have forgotten its potency; our culture has no place for this desire for what is intangible. In the Christian tradition this relationship is embodied in Mary Magdalene's devotion for Christ. After the crucifixion she stood at the empty sepulchre, where he had been buried, weeping. And when Jesus, risen from the dead, came and spoke to her, saying "Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou?" she first mistook him for a gardener until he called her by name, "Mary," and then she "turned herself and said 'Rabboni,' which is to say, Master."

In this meeting there are longing and devotion and the ancient mystery of the relationship of teacher and disciple. It has been often overlooked that Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Christ, but it is deeply significant; for it is this inner feminine attitude of the heart, of longing and devotion that she embodies, that opens the lover to the transcendent mystery of love in which suffering and death are the doorway to a higher state of consciousness. The lover waits weeping for the Beloved to reveal His true nature.

Our culture has forgotten and buried the doorway of devotion, and the lover is often left stranded, not even knowing the real nature and purpose of the longing that tugs at the heart. It is easy to think that this discontent of the soul is a psychological problem, to mistake longing for depression or identify it as a mother complex or the result of an unhappy marriage. We need to reclaim the sanctity of sadness and the meaning of the heart's tears. For the longing of the lover is a longing to return to the source in which everything is embraced in its wholeness. The suffering of His lovers is the labor pains that awaken us to this higher consciousness, in which love joins this world with the infinite, and the heart embraces life not from the divisive perspective of the ego but from the eternal dimension of the Self. From within the heart the oneness of love becomes life's deepest wonder, for, in the words of Hildegard von Bingen, "It is the heart that sees the primordial eternity of every creature."

If we can create a context of longing, then those whose hearts are burdened with this quest will come to know the true nature of their pain. They will no longer need to repress it, fearing it as an abnormality or a psychological problem. We need to be able to collectively affirm this inner secret: that the heart suffers because it has not forgotten its true love.

If we follow the path of any pain, any psychological wounding, it will lead us to this one primal pain: the pain of separation. Being born into this world, we experience being separate from oneness, from God, from our heart's Beloved. We are banished from paradise and carry the scars of this separation. But if we embrace the suffering, if we allow it to lead us deep within ourself, it will take us deeper than any psychological healing. Love and suffering are powerful transformative agents because they embrace the mystery of being human. Longing is love's call to "return to the root of the root of your own self," to the place within the core of our being where we are always whole.

We are conditioned to avoid pain, but for the mystic the pain of the heart is the thread that leads us, the song of the soul that uncovers us. Meister Eckhart said, "God is the sigh in the soul," and this sigh, this sorrow, is a most precious poison. How love heals us from the sufferings we inflict upon ourself is always a mystery. Love cannot be understood by the mind just as it cannot be contained by the ego. Love is the power that opens and transforms us, that intoxicates and bewilders us. Love leads us deeper, away from the prison of our limited self to the freedom and wholeness of our divine nature. In the words of the Sufi saint Jâmî, "Never turn away from love, not even love in a human form, for love alone will free you from yourself."