

Afterglow¹

“Starting well is easy. Ending well takes something more.”

Scott M. Stanley

We live in a culture saturated with constructions of love defined as passion. Passion is dominant because passion is powerful. What person does not either desire it, bask in the glory of it realized, or grieve over the loss of it in life? Passion’s potency arises from the promise, whether obtained or not, of the deep acceptance of one’s soul. Passion hints at the possibility of a soul mate. But there is something more powerful than passion—something that passion is incomplete without.

For most people, passion at its height resembles something like the birth of a fire on dry wood: great fury and heat, crackling flames leaping high. The start of such a fire is magnificent. My focus here is not on the great fire, but on the coals that are begun from it. It is the long burning coals and embers that sustain the promise of heat and fire to come.

"It’s as easy as falling in love." Perhaps you've used this

¹ Citation: Stanley, S. M. (2001). Afterglow. In J. Levine & H. J. Markman (Eds.) *Why do fools fall in love?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

expression to tell a friend how easy it was to learn or do something new. Falling in love is the easy part of it all. It’s the flaming, blazing, rush of love. Passion. But it’s seldom the sustaining part. Starting well is easy. Ending well takes something more. I am not arguing against passion. A pitiful life it would be without the possibility or realization of it.

However, what sustains the pile of coals with their promise and warmth? What is the force of the more complete love? There are many answers one could give, but I want to focus on *sacrifice*. The word sacrifice has fallen into disfavor with the ascendancy of a focus on "me" in our culture. However, I think the word will make a comeback for the simple reason that long-term love is not remotely possible without sacrifice, passionate or not. The glow in the coals is sustained by the gentle blowing of sacrifice.

In his book *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky used the character of Father Zosima to express great thoughts. Here is one of my favorite lines from that work.

Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly

performed and in the sight of all. Men will even give their lives if only the ordeal does not last long but is soon over, with all looking on and applauding as though on stage. But active love is labour and fortitude, and for some people too, perhaps, a complete science.

Active love, he says, is a "labour" and a "fortitude." It's gritty, enduring, resilient love. Love in dreams is wonderful. When dreamy love enters the confines of time and space, it can arouse places in the soul like nothing else. Sparks fly. However, Dostoevsky implied it is fleeting and can be vain. It is also the easy part. You do not "switch on" passionate love, it switches you on. Sometimes it switches on you. Wild fire.

Such love does not have to be fleeting. For too many couples, it is made to flee in the face of cruel slings and arrows. Whether or not most couples can sustain passionate love has often been debated. But I am sure that no couple sustains it for long without wedding it to the harder edged love of sacrifice. To push the metaphor, the only couples who can ignore tending the coals are those who have an endless supply of wood to throw into the

flames. Coals don't matter if you always have flames.

To use Dostoevsky's term, active love is that which will require you, at some points, to put aside self-interest in favor of the good of the other and the relationship. I have been puzzled for years now about Dostoevsky's point that active love (that which I believe is enacted in various types of sacrifice) is to some, a complete science. Dostoevsky wrote in a time when science held an almost mythical promise to improve life for human beings. Whatever degree this promise has been realized, what good science does is yield more complete understandings that can lead to better devices and better decisions. Perhaps Dostoevsky's point here was that active love is more complete than love in dreams. I believe the fundamental ingredient of this more complete, active love is sacrifice in its various expressions.

What does passion lack that sacrifice makes up for? Passion lacks the ability to be directed by your will. That's probably why we are all so deeply affected by passion—it is captivating. Sacrifice comes from the active, choosing part of love based in your will. You can choose to love in this way because you can choose to do loving acts. In an

important way, sacrifice balances passion in the hearth of love.

I realize that the word sacrifice conjures up images for many that are unpleasant. Perhaps an animal sacrifice comes to your mind. Or, a marriage in which one relatively victimized partner chronically gives up all for another who is nothing more than a selfish lout, or worse, a brutish tyrant. I am not addressing such matters here. The aspect of love I wish to call to mind is far grander and more noble, yet most often acted upon the smaller stages of life. The range of behaviors that can reflect a loving sacrifice is great. A few examples:

- When one chooses to forgive another for some past hurtful deed.
- When one responds gently, and with care, to a vulnerable aspect in the other--even when this aspect is not attractive to gaze upon.
- When one chooses to go to the movie the other most wanted to see when it was not the one more personally desired.
- When one decides with force of will *not* to return a negative comment even when believing the partner lashed out to harm.

- When one decides some gain in the realization of the others dreams in life is worth some loss in one's own.

I have seen many unwise acts of "sacrifice" that epitomize "casting pearls before swine." There are many appropriate expressions of these concerns. But I am far more troubled about a culture that obscures an important truth with a focus on "me." The truth is that, for most couples, a variety of sacrificial gifts are needed to sustain any hope of real, lasting love. Surely there is no opportunity for passion to stay kindled where there is no harder, deeper love being worked out in the coals. This is love that acts to bless the other.

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