



REDEFINING LOVE IN MIDLIFE

By Kalpana (Rose) M. Kumar, M.D.

It seems natural to write an article on love in February as we have an opportunity to reflect on this topic this month. We need to begin understanding the difference between healthy and unhealthy love. Healthy love does not involve compromise. We maintain our sovereignty and truth when we are in a relationship that is based on healthy love. Many of us have been conditioned to compromise ourselves in the name of love. We were taught to subdue our inner wisdom which warns us when we compromise our needs in relationships. It is not uncommon for us to put aside our inner longings and behave in ways that are expected of us by society. A relationship that is based on a dynamic like this is unhealthy. Healthy love always coexists with our truth. Compromising our truth is unhealthy. It results in codependency.

We may suppress our truth in fear of losing a relationship. A relationship dynamic based in fear does not feel clear. It feels contaminated by the lack of meaning or feelings of anger or sadness. This dynamic is based in fear, not love. We adapt out of fear in order to survive. Over time, the pressure of not speaking our truth builds and is likely to surface in the form of symptoms that are either physical or relational. Medical symptoms that commonly present from this pressure are hypertension, depression and anxiety. Symptoms can also present emotionally such as anger or resentment. A relationship that is contaminated with fear and results in symptoms usually does not last.

Many of us who have gone through a breakup or a divorce can see in hindsight how we may have compromised ourselves in the relationship. We were taught to not speak our truth for fear of upsetting another or 'making waves'. We were also conditioned to compromise to 'keep the peace'. With the arrival of midlife, these conditioned patterns no longer work. The truth of the relationship eventually surfaces. Our being becomes restless and we crave authenticity as we enter the midlife gateway. When we experience the end of a relationship in midlife we can use it as an opportunity to redefine love from a place of health. Healthy love does not require compromise. It is grounded in reciprocal truths and interdependency, not codependency. As we transform ourselves in the alchemical fires of midlife, we can reclaim our sovereignty and shed our adapted identities. We can use this as an opportunity to become healthy. As we embrace our truth, we no longer compromise. We become real.

An important part of the journey of becoming real is learning how to love ourselves. A large percentage of women do not know how to do that. They have spent their lives caring for others at the cost of themselves. Self-care feels unfamiliar after spending so much time in self-sacrifice. Self-care is like a spiritual practice. It needs to be cultivated consistently over time. When consciousness is brought to our needs for even ten minutes a day, it begins to transform our relationship to ourselves and heals the symptoms of neglect we carry within our feeling function. We can replace these symptoms with compassion for ourselves. As we learn to love ourselves, our love for others becomes healthy. Without self-love, the love we give others is at the cost of ourselves.

The cost of loving from the adapted self can also be seen in the rate of heart disease in our country. The heart is the organ that feels love. When we feel anger, emptiness, depression or anxiety, we stimulate stress hormones in our body which increase our risk of a heart attack. We crave comfort foods that are bad for our health and consumption of which further increase our cardiac disease risk. Self-love relaxes the body and reduces stress hormones. It makes us more aware of the foods we eat and the amount of exercise or rest we need. It reduces our risk of heart disease.

I believe midlife is a turning point, a second chance for us to become authentic, to redefine ourselves and to reclaim our health. Our traditional definitions of love and power come into question as we experience the transformational fires of midlife. Those fires gift us with a sacred opportunity to fulfill our longings for health and meaning and to mentor those we love from a position of health. Many of us worry about the imprinting our children received from our unhealthy and adapted definitions of love. The miracle of transformation during the second half of our lives brings with it the opportunity for our children to witness and transmute the unhealthy behaviors we unconsciously taught them. This reduces their risk of living from their adapted selves. Our personal gateway to authenticity can also be a gateway for our children to become real. Redefining love from a place of health is an important and sacred part of the work of reclaiming ourselves and healing the world.

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