

# Love Makes You Do The Wacky

by

Jim Checkley

I wish I could take credit for the title of the sermon. But I can't. The title comes from an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I really like the show, having once done a service here called *All Things Buffy*. What's going on is that Buffy is in love with somebody and is complaining that he is acting all jealous and won't admit it. When Buffy complains to her friend Willow that her boyfriend is being totally irrational Willow says, "Love makes you do the wacky." To which Buffy responds: "That's the truth."

I agree with Buffy. Love does make you do the wacky. I'll bet everybody in this room has at least one story of wacky behavior caused by being in love. Which begs the question, why? Why does love make us do the wacky? Why do we risk our jobs, our friends, our futures, our very lives in the name of love? What is it about romantic love that not only does it have its own holiday, but it provides both the greatest joys and the worst agonies imaginable. As the young Sam laments in the movie *Love Actually*, how can there be anything worse than the total agony of being in love?

I was looking for a definition of love and found several I want to share with you. The first is simple enough: **love is a type of insanity curable by marriage**. You laugh now, but file this one away for later.

How about this one. It's from a conference of sociologists back in 1977. Listen carefully.

**Love is the cognitive-affective state characterized by intrusive and obsessive fantasizing concerning reciprocity of amorous feeling by the object of the amorousness.**

I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable with the person who came up with that one dating my daughter. In any event, there are long dictionary definitions, but I think part of the problem in defining love is that in our culture, love is required to be all things to all people all of the time.

We love our spouse or our partner, certainly. But we also love our cars, our kids, our favorite colors, our food, our jokes, our art, and on and on. The word love has as many meanings and covers as much ground as the word "God." Eskimos have 20 words for snow and we have one word for love. At least the Greeks had four words for love: Eros, or romantic love, agape or spiritual love, philia or Platonic love, and storge or natural affection, like that of a parent to a child. But we English speaking people, with a language that has by far the biggest, most encompassing vocabulary, we only have one word for love. Why is that? I think part of it is that our culture is very schizophrenic about love and there are enormous sensitivities around it, especially romantic love.

For example, you may have heard of Leo Buscaglia who once taught a course on love at UCLA called Love 1-A and wrote many books on the subject. Dr. Buscaglia taught that love is something we need to learn about and that it isn't something that just comes to us by osmosis. As a matter of culture and social behavior, I think we can all agree with that. As you might also imagine, however, Buscaglia's course created some controversy at the time as people complained that university is no place to teach about love—university should be reserved for important stuff like history, language, science, and engineering. Besides, love is, well, a delicate subject, one that should be kept in a brown paper wrapper and only spoken about in hushed whispers behind closed doors or on the streets or under the covers.

I don't know about you, but I think all of that is just ridiculous. I agree with, of all people, Benjamin Disraeli, who said "We are all born to love. It is the principle of existence and its only end." Disraeli was right on at least two counts: first, as I'll explain in a minute, we are born to love. The mechanisms of romantic love are hard wired and we are bound to that drive, those desires, like nothing else in life except eating and drinking. And second, I believe that romantic love, sex, and reproduction are the very purpose of our natural existence, the focus of life, and the only inherently meaningful thing about life itself beyond simply being.

In order to explain this, I'm going to have to do two related things. First, I'm going to have to talk a little about recent discoveries in the biology of love, discoveries that are at once disturbing and liberating for us as thinking beings. Second, I am going to talk about what we are, we humans, and how we are both a what and a who, a critter and a being, and how that revelation, one that has been fought for millennia, can set us free.

I've been reading a book called *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation* by Olivia Judson. It is a very clever book written as if Dr. Tatiana were answering letters about sex, reproduction, and other related issues from a wide variety of members of the animal kingdom. Talk about wacky. I'm telling you, insect reproduction in particular is bizarre and often deadly. Males in several species literally die for the opportunity to mate and pass on their genes. If life on this planet is the design of some intelligent creator, then he was on serious drugs when he came up with the myriad methods of sexual reproduction extant in the animal kingdom. If you want to get educated and blown away at the same time, I highly recommend reading Dr. Tatiana.

Insects don't have the capacity for rational thought. At least we don't think they do. Their behavior is thus controlled by their genetic code and is hardwired into their very being. How else can we explain the sometimes suicidal and often dangerous behavior indulged in by whole host of critters in the animal kingdom? For a long time people believed that humans were immune to that sort of hard wiring, that our big brains removed us from the ranks of creatures who were hard wired for certain responses and behaviors in the world of romantic love, sex, and reproduction.

It is becoming crystal clear that we were very wrong about that. Very wrong indeed.

Study after study has shown that what we call romantic love is the result of chemical processes in the brain that are not only hard wired, but result in brain activity that is virtually indistinguishable from being on hard drugs, and in particular, drugs like cocaine. Now think about that for a second. Being head over heels in love results in or from, take your pick, brain activity that is the same as being on hard drugs. Is it any wonder that people routinely behave insanely when they are in that stomach wrenching, sleep deprived, dramatic phase of love? The poets who wrote about love didn't know the half of it.

Let me tell you just a tiny bit about what scientists have discovered. If you go on the Internet and Google this stuff, you will find mountains of it. I can only give you a tiny taste of the work that has been done, and that a simplified version. But I think you'll find it fascinating nonetheless.

In a study of the effect of pictures of beautiful women on the brains of men, researchers found that the pictures activated the same reward circuits in the brains of heterosexual men as did food and cocaine. Here is proof—as if we needed it—that men truly are visually stimulated. As co-author of the study, Dan Ariely of MIT said, “This is hard-core circuitry. Beauty is working similar to a drug.”

Another study showed men a slide show of random women for several seconds each, but the men could extend the viewing time by pressing keys on a keypad. You can guess the result. The men worked frantically to keep the beautiful women on the screen, on average pressing the keyboard more than 4,700 times over a 40 minute span, prompting one researcher to observe that “these guys look like rodents bar-pressing for cocaine.”

There are lots of other individual studies I could mention, including one that demonstrated that a woman's choice of which men she finds sexy and desirable changes depending on how close she is to ovulation, preferring the almost stereotypical tall, dark, rough hewn guys at that critical time, while selecting more round faced “nice” guys at other times. But there is one person who has studied the mechanisms of romantic love for years and whose findings and conclusions deserve extended discussion. She is Helen Fisher of Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Dr. Fisher is one of the leaders in the scientific study of the biology of romantic love and in 2002 published a landmark study on what is happening in the brains of people who claim they are totally head over heels in love. She has written two popular books on the subject, *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love* and *The Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray*. I cannot possibly do justice to her work here, but I do want to talk about Dr. Fisher's theories on how human beings fall in love.

Dr. Fisher has proposed that humans fall in love in three stages. Stage one consists of simple and generic lust—that undifferentiated general sense of desire. Studies show that lust is mediated in the brain by the hormones testosterone and estrogen, with testosterone having been

shown to play an important role in women. These hormones appear to function to get a person “out looking,” so to speak.

The second stage is attraction to a specific person. This is that truly love-struck phase where each instant apart is a lifetime, where you call each other 20 times a day, and where you can't eat, can't sleep, and can think of nothing else. In the attraction phase, a group of neurotransmitters called “monoamines” play an important role. These include dopamine, which is also activated by cocaine and nicotine; adrenalin—the hormone of fight or flight; and serotonin, which plays a role both in romantic love and depression—not a big surprise there.

Dopamine is the reward hormone and its production is what we are after when we desperately need to be with our beloved. It's also the hormone that is made in bucket-loads when brains are exposed to cocaine. Serotonin is the tricky one in that it can actually induce temporary insanity. Thus, many of the millions of people who do crazy things for love, who swim rivers naked, jump out of airplanes with friends to hold up gigantic signs of proposal while they parachute into a lover's back yard, and all the other stuff you've ever heard about, many of those people actually do qualify as temporarily insane.

The third phase in Dr. Fisher's scheme is called attachment and it involves becoming bonded with and attached to a specific person. It is marked by the sense of calm, peace, and stability one feels with a long-term partner and is driven by the hormones oxytocin and vasopressin. Those hormones are particularly generated at the climax of intercourse in both the woman and the man, respectively, and are the hormones of attachment. Crazy enough, oxytocin and vasopressin seem to interfere with the production of dopamine and adrenalin, which is why the madness of the head over heels attraction phase fades as the attachment phase progresses—a finding that actually provides a basis for the otherwise cynical definition of love as an insanity curable by marriage.

In fact, studies have shown that it is the hormone vasopressin that is responsible for monogamy in a critter called the prairie vol. Once vasopressin is triggered in the brain of the male prairie vol, that vol is faithful to its mate for life and becomes very protective of its mate. Block the vasopressin and that very same vol becomes promiscuous and doesn't care anymore about protecting its mate. These are very powerful chemicals, although the on or off mechanism being mediated so completely by just one hormone is rare.

Certainly, the situation in humans is much more complicated than in prairie vols, but Dr. Fisher nonetheless cautions that you should never mess around with somebody you do not want to fall in love with—because if you generate enough oxytocin and vasopressin, you very well might fall in love and become attached despite yourself.

As a result of her's and others' studies, Dr. Fisher has reached the remarkable conclusion that romantic love is not actually an emotion. It is instead, she claims, a motivation system, a drive, a need that compels people to go out and find a partner and is more akin to the need to eat than being happy or sad. Romantic love, the attraction phase, says Dr. Fisher, is an even stronger

desire than simple lust. “People don’t kill themselves just because they don’t get sex,” she says. But we all know that they will and do kill themselves over failed romantic love adventures.

There is so much more going on in evolutionary biology—for instance the role of smell in attraction and the fact that women are thousands of times more sensitive to musk-like odors than are men—but I don’t have the time to go into even a fraction of them. What I will say is the discoveries of how deeply hard wired we are for lust, attraction, romantic love, and attachment are not a surprise to me. Reproduction is much too important to leave to the whims of consciousness.

And it makes sense that humans are subject to reproductive forces that are the same or at least similar to those that drive other animals. Said another way, before there was consciousness, there was reproduction and all the drives and hard wiring that nature provided to insure the continuation of life. For the last handful of millennia perhaps, humans have been able to cogitate about love and sex and reproduction. But three or four million years ago, those things just had to happen for the species to continue and nature had to insure they would. And they obviously did since we are all here today. Science has, and continues to, confirm that we have inherited those mechanisms.

My point in telling you all this is not to pretend to be able to fully explain why or how people fall in love, or even the biological basis for romantic love. Rather, my point is to simply suggest that there is in fact a powerful biological basis for romantic love, that it matters, and we should take account of it in our lives.

But these revelations do not sit well with many people, who bristle at the thought that humans might be subject to instincts, hard wired instructions, and that something as sacred in our culture as romantic love might be the product of brain chemicals that mimic the actions of drugs. As unsettling as the scientific discoveries may be, I think the truth is that we humans are a natural part of the natural world and are certainly a product of evolutionary biology and the mechanisms that Darwin and his successors have identified. But we are also conscious beings with the ability to make choices that either compliment or reject the signals, motivations, and desires that our DNA has made part of our experience of life.

This is why it is useful to think of ourselves as both a what and a who. The what is the entity that Mother Nature has created out of the raw materials of life and which is subject to the same laws, the same forces, and the same desires as any other higher level creature on this planet. The who is a relatively new entity, a conscious being who seemingly at least, can make choices about how to proceed with existence and seems to be a little bit confused at the moment about what existence is supposed to mean. These two aspects of humanity coexist in one body. Both matter.

This is also the reason I think people are often confused when they ask the question, “What is the meaning of life?” Life is a process that goes on all around us, has been going on for millions upon millions of years. Humans are included in the process of life, but so is a snail

darting or an elephant or a wasp. So when we think of life in the broadest sense, it is clear that the purpose and meaning of life is reproduction and all that goes with it.

But when people use the word “life” to substitute for consciousness and awareness, then that’s a different question and not one I have any desire to tackle today. Well, all right. I will say this: whatever purpose or meaning there is to human existence has to be created, invented as it were, which is the role of culture, religion, and other philosophical enterprises that seek to imbue our conscious existence with meaning. But the meaning of life, the purpose of life, that is clear: it is to survive, today, tomorrow, and always.

Up until thirty to fifty years ago, most educated people saw a human baby as a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate upon which anything could be written without the pesky influences of instincts and other hard wired instructions, or drives. The *tabula rasa* position denied the existence of or at least the importance of hard wiring in humans and insisted that everything we are, believe, feel, and imagine was the result of nurture, culture, and learned phenomena.

Virtually nobody who studies these things today thinks of a baby as a *tabula rasa*. That concept has been relegated to the same graveyard as phlogiston and the ether. Having said that, I must emphasize that just how much has been pre-programmed and how powerfully is subject to debate, some of it fierce. Still, it is clear that we are born with hard wired drives, call them instincts, call them predispositions, call them an inborn style, but they are there. And probably the most powerful, the one that dominates so much of our lives, is the need for romantic love. Like every other creature on the planet, human beings modify their behaviors to accommodate those incredibly powerful desires—or as Willow says, we all do the wacky.

Can these drives and desires be overcome by the who that we are—our conscious selves? Of course they can. People routinely choose to do behaviors that conflict with the urges and desires brought about by romantic love and its chemical addictions to a person. It happens all the time. It’s one of the things that distinguish us from insects and the rest of the animal world. A praying mantis will go ahead and get its head bitten off in exchange for the opportunity to mate. Even the most testosterone and dopamine driven man, however, would likely decline that offer.

But does the fact that we can control our behaviors mean we should not acknowledge the drives and desires that are making our lives both wonderful and miserable? Shall we pretend that we have conscious control of who we find attractive and that any feelings we experience that are not sanctioned by the dominant culture are to be labeled as sinful and wrong?

My answer is an emphatic no. I think it is time we looked at these feelings, these desires, without embarrassment, without shame, without feeling defensive that we are, after all, the product of evolution and children of the earth as much as children of our conscious souls.

While the idea that romantic love is a hard wired mechanism might spoil some of our notions of romance, it is also liberating. I suggest that if people would let go of the notion of the *tabula rasa*, would let go of the notion that falling down the rabbit hole of romantic love is a

totally conscious choice, and realize that all those powerful feelings and urges are perfectly natural and are deeply imbedded into the essence of our natural being, perhaps we could all relax a little and not be so harsh with each other and ourselves.

Moreover, once that admission is made and the feelings themselves brought out into the open without embarrassment, they are much easier to deal with. Suppressed feelings and desires have a way of growing in the dark, just like mushrooms, but tend to lose their almost preternatural hold on us once we put them in the light of day

Preachers routinely, and for thousands of years, have taken nature to be sinful. Western culture definitely assigns passion to the dark side, the night side, the female side, of life, the side that is opposed by the light of reason, the cold hard facts of rationality, and is ruled by the day and the male sky god. But when you pull all of nature over into the side of sin, you degrade the deepest and most fundamental parts of what we are as living creatures and deny the importance of millions of years of evolutionary biology.

Behavior matters, of course, and I am not advocating or justifying rampant infidelity just because we are hard wired for romantic love and all the feelings and desires that go with it. But I do think our ancestors and our Western religions got it totally wrong. I think that the world being split into male and female with romantic love and sexual reproduction, however those drives and desires may manifest in any individual, creates most of the pure joy and happiness we experience in life. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that when we accuse a young man or woman of being “superficial” because they are attracted to somebody because that person is beautiful or sexy, we’ve got it backwards. There’s nothing superficial about it; rather such attraction is one of the most deeply rooted aspects of our natural existence. It is not only not sinful, it is part of the very essence of the inherent meaning of life.

So as we approach Valentine’s Day, let me conclude by reaffirming that Willow was absolutely right when she told Buffy “love makes you do the wacky.” We understand why that is so just a little better now than our mothers and fathers and their mothers and fathers did, but the feelings, the desires, the power of love remain undiluted and are eternally ours. No matter the cultural spin we put on them, love, sex and reproduction are simply fundamental to us and our beings. We truly are born to love. It is our birthright, our purpose, our meaning, and our glory.

Amen and amen.

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