

## Love, Faith, and Ritual



Norman Rockwell, Freedom to Worship

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It's not easy to sustain love, at least not with constant emotional fervor. Misunderstandings, irritations, tiredness, jealousies, hurt, temperamental differences, the familiarity that breeds contempt, and simple boredom invariably chip away at our emotional and affective edges and, soon enough, fervor gives way to routine, the groove becomes the rut, and love seems to disappear.

But we can easily misread this.

First off, just because the surface of a relationship seems clouded with misunderstanding, irritation, and hurt doesn't mean we don't love each other. Love sits at a place beneath the ebb and flow of irritation and boredom. You can be willing to die for someone, even as at that very moment you are seething with anger at him or her.

John Shea, in the brilliant series of homilies published through Liturgical Press, gives us a wonderful example of this. He shares the story of a woman who took in her aging mother to help her while she was recovering from a stroke. The daughter was painstakingly attentive to her mother's every need; yet, at a point, a dreadful fight broke out - over a trivial incident regarding a hard-boiled egg. In the middle

of their war of words, the mother asked her daughter: "Why are you doing all of this for me anyway?"

Her daughter responded by listing her reasons: "I was afraid for her; I wanted to get her well; I felt maybe I'd ignored her when I was younger. I needed to show her I was strong. I needed to get her ready to go home alone; old age, and on and on. I was amazed myself. I could have gone on giving reasons all night. Even she was impressed.

"Junk," she said when I was done.

"Junk?" I yelled. Like, boy, she'd made a real mistake with that remark.

"Yes, junk," she said again, but a little more quietly. And that little more-more-quiet tone got me. And she went on: "You don't have to have all those reasons. We love each other. That's enough."

Irritation, anger, and boredom within a relationship do not necessarily mean that love has died, as this story illustrates. Love rests at a deeper place. But how do we touch that place inside less-than-idyllic feelings?

We do it through ritual. Our lives together within every kind of community are sustained by small and big rituals that keep us together, keep us respectful, and let us wait in patience throughout the ups and downs of shared life. For example; sometimes we greet each other with real warmth and sometimes our greetings barely mask our irritation or boredom. But, we still greet each other. Saying "Good morning" is a ritual act, an important one. It says that we love and care for each other, even when that isn't exactly what we may be feeling on a given day. That's also true of the perfunctory peck on the cheek as we greet or say goodbye, the ritual hug, the sign of peace in our churches, and (especially) our commitment to sit down with each other at regular times for meals and other get-to-gathers. These are important rituals that say with our action and our commitment what our feelings sometimes cannot say, namely: "I love you! I'm here for you, even when we are both too tired, too over-familiar with each other, too pre-occupied and busy, and too irritated by our differences to feel much fervor in our love at this moment." Ritual speaks for love, even as it needs always to be undergirded by love.

The same holds true for faith. In faith, just as in love, there is a surface and there is an undergirding. The deeper reality is in the undergirding and we should be prepared for lots of shifting ground on the surface.

In our faith journey, there will be moments of fervor, of emotional warmth, of warm security; but there will also be periods, long periods, sometimes bitter ones, where on the surface we will feel only dryness, boredom, a sense of God's absence, and perhaps even a positive distaste for the things of God and faith. This doesn't necessarily mean we lack effort or that we are suffering in our faith from the familiarity that breeds contempt. We can, as Chesterton classically suggested, try to look at things familiar until they look unfamiliar again, but that won't, as the mystics assure us, always cure the problem.

Faith, like love, needs to be sustained through ritual, through ritual acts that let our commitment and our action say what we cannot always say in our words and our feelings. And our faith tradition provides these rituals for us: reading the scriptures, participating in the Eucharist, praying the office of

the church, praying the rosary, praying from various kinds of prayer books, sitting in silent centering prayer, and, most important of all, simply showing up regularly for church. All of these say what the woman whose story we shared said to her daughter: Beneath all this, we love each other. That's enough!

Ron Rolheiser