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HUMAN FREEDOM IN LOVE:  
HOW OUR WHOLENESS CALLS US TO LOVE

Kayla Stock

I didn't fall in love with you.  
I walked into love with you, with my eyes wide open,  
choosing to take every step along the way.  
I do believe in fate and destiny,  
but I also believe we are only fated to do  
the things that we'd choose anyway.  
And I'd choose you;  
in a hundred lifetimes, in a hundred worlds,  
in any version of reality,  
I'd find you and choose you.

-Kierstan White, *The Chaos of Stars* (2013)<sup>1</sup>

When I first came across this quote from Kiersten White's novel *The Chaos of Stars*, I recall being impressed by the mature understanding of love that is described, especially from a young adult fiction novel. As this quote demonstrates, love is a choice—a choice needing to be chosen over and again. Love is also an action. We move toward love, chase it, pursue it. We walk with love, journey with love, and grow with love. Unfortunately this quote from *The Chaos of Stars* seems to stand in stark contrast to many notions of love found in most young adult literature and film, as well as mass media in general. One needs look no further than the stories of many Disney princesses to believe that love is

the ongoing plateau that one finds anew every morning of their “happily ever after.”

In actuality, love is gritty. This vision of polished perfection—this *laissez-faire* love—offers no useful depth. Further, popular stories, television programs, movies, as well as cultural narratives also lead people to believe that their completeness is only to be found in another person. It seems reasonable then that this leads to shaping and forming another person according to one’s own needs. Neither is this love. Love calls humans to something much greater.

In order to properly orient one’s understanding of the love between two people, a grounding in theological anthropology is necessary. At its most basic level, theological anthropology is the study of human beings living in a world in which divinity also exists as Creator, Sustainer, Lover. An important, even foundational, undertaking of this field revolves around the question of human freedom. This is the thread I intend to follow over the course of this paper by delving into the deeply nuanced contributions that theological anthropology lends to the understanding of human freedom. Using this more robust sense of the term, I will then connect human freedom, love, and relationships. To what are we called when we, as free individuals, are living and loving in relationship with one another? How can our bonds of love be strengthened by a renewed grasp of our own—and everyone else’s—innate human freedom?

## I. POPULAR SOCIETAL CONSIDERATIONS ON HUMAN FREEDOM

Americans love more than freedom. I have seen French fries get renamed freedom fries. I have heard degrees Fahrenheit dubbed “freedom units.” For Americans, freedom is the foundation

of the American dream, in which a person can achieve anything they desire so long as they work hard enough to accomplish that dream. It is also connected to zealous patriotism. Undergirding this belief is the value of unlimitedness. Thus, not only is freedom linked to patriotism, but it is also related to self-determination and a radical sense of individuality. In this framework, freedom seemingly negates human finitude. Freedom involves having no external restrictions and no obligations to other people. We are ultimately in charge of our lives, the authors of our own destinies. This freedom also incorporates the understanding that one has not only the ability but the right to make one's own choices and to say or act without any regard for consequences. We are never only beholden to ourselves; we are finite humans, living in communion and relationship with one another. This necessitates commitments, limits, and boundaries, therefore substantiating the idea of human freedom as unlimitedness as being a truly impoverished understanding.

## II. POPULAR SOCIETAL CONSIDERATIONS ON LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

My overall intention is to move toward a new understanding of the connection between human freedom and its call to romantic relationship. Thus, it seems prudent to also discuss how society perceives romantic relationships in order to eventually come to a deeper understanding of true self-giving love.

In the book *Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media: Analysis and Criticism of Unrealistic Portrayals and Their Influence*, Mary-Lou Galician formats her book around twelve commonly held beliefs about love and relationships.<sup>2</sup> The main thesis of Galician's work is to critique these perceptions, accurately terming them to be myths that hinder the development of

real, lasting love.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to focus primarily on one identified myth: “The right mate ‘completes you’—filling your needs and making your dreams come true.”<sup>4</sup> Galician describes this as a rescue fantasy that can be read as promoting codependency, “an unhealthy dependence of two people on each other who reinforce each other’s need to be needed and/or rescued. Codependents are people who let another person’s behavior affect them and who are obsessed with controlling that person’s behavior.”<sup>5</sup> Not only is this a common theme in fairy tales and many simplistic romantic comedy movies, it seeps into the consciousness of children and young adults, especially young girls and women. Galician continues:

Feminist poet and cultural critic Adrienne Rich argued that women have been conditioned to believe that they are incomplete and abnormal without a man and that this conditioning—which she termed ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and viewed as criminal—can lead to the acceptance of counterproductive and even abusive relationships to which women will cling in desperation to meet that cultural norm.<sup>6</sup>

Cathy Troupp’s book *Why Do We Fall in Love? The Psychology of Choosing a Partner* offers another perspective of how relationships are envisioned and pursued. Troupp identifies four themes that happen in progression as two people fall in love: hope, projection, disillusionment, and attachment.<sup>7</sup> Troupp writes that “firstly, there is the hope, for some, of reproducing and reexperiencing the comfort and safety of childhood and the warmth of belonging to a family; for others, the hope of making up for bad aspects of the past, for recouping love and security that ought to have been there and were not.”<sup>8</sup> This illustrates another way in which people often seek out a romantic relationship for a reason other than the desire to give one’s self in love to another. As complex human beings, it is not surprising that the reasons people

seek these relationships are a.) multi-faceted, b.) self-serving in some way, and c.) self-medicating or a balm for past wounds. These can be dangerous perceptions or needs to be bringing into a relationship with another person, which can certainly threaten the stability of the relationship over time.

Further, there is a strong focus, though oftentimes unconscious and left undiscussed, on the importance of marriage and relationships in society. Marriage is seen as a way of completing or perfecting oneself, and therefore those who do not marry are deficient in some way, according to this thought process. Thus, in this framework, with many myths surrounding romance and relationships, with people seeking out relationships for non-altruistic, self-focused, or self-healing reasons, this system is set up to fail and to deeply hurt many people in its failure.

On the other hand, there is an emerging trend among American high school and college age students and other younger adults that swings far in the opposite direction of the concerns discussed previously. Laura Sessions Stepp, describes this relatively new phenomenon known as hook up culture:

Partners hook up with the understanding that however far they go sexually, neither should become romantically involved in any serious way. Hooking up's defining characteristic is the ability to *unhook* from a partner at any time...The freedom to unhook from someone—ostensibly without repercussions—gives them maximum flexibility. Although I use both phrases, this is not a hook up culture so much as an unhooked culture. It is a way of thinking about relationships.<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that hook up culture offers a different array of problems than does the codependent, rescue narrative. Hook ups are a perfect application of the societal notion of freedom described previously. By nature, hook ups are centered on immediate satisfaction and gratification without the theoretical necessity of commitment. Further, one's choices tonight need not have

any bearing on tomorrow night. It is the ultimate exercise in unlimitedness, that is “relationships” without restrictions. The hook up culture certainly raises many questions and garners many responses from people looking in from the outside.<sup>10</sup> Stepp offers some of these many questions regarding the young women partaking in these activities:

Who was reminding them that sex, in any form, is more powerful when you don't throw it around, more satisfying when it's savored with someone you love? Who was asking them to think seriously about their goals for happiness beyond the law degree?...Who was helping them see that loving relationships are uniquely satisfying and manageable—and need not tie them down for the rest of their lives?<sup>11</sup>

### III. THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO HUMAN FREEDOM

John Sachs has two important quotations to begin the discussion on real human freedom. The first sets the stage for a new paradigm and end goal of freedom: “Freedom is from God and for God. On its deepest level, it is the capacity and responsibility to be in loving relationship with God. It is the gift of love, the capacity for love and it finds its one true fulfillment in love.”<sup>12</sup> This is a radical departure from the popular sense of freedom that is self-serving at its core. Rather, human freedom rightly considered draws a person into love and into relationship. Sachs continues, discussing the importance of choice in freedom, stating that:

While freedom certainly entails the ability to change one's mind or to have a real change of heart, its goal is not infinite options or endless revision. As a matter of fact, change just for the sake of change is often a sign of immaturity or great unfreedom. In many respects, we are freest when, no longer torn in different directions by multitudes of possibilities, we can at last surrender to one of them whole-heartedly.<sup>13</sup>

This is theological anthropology's largest and most important critique of contemporary, societal constructions of freedom. A shallow grasp on freedom immediately circles back in on itself and does not lead to any transformation. Conversely, we can know growth only when we give ourselves over to something greater, when we come to terms with rather than ignore our finitude, and when we commit and dedicate ourselves and our lives to one thing, to one person, to one belief. Saying "yes" to one life will *always* mean saying "no" to a multitude of other lives; there will always be sacrifice involved. However, human freedom leads to self-actualization only when we can shed the false selves we build up around us as comfort and protection. In *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology*, Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler discuss Rahnerian transcendental freedom:

This freedom is first of all "the subject's being responsible for himself, so that freedom in its fundamental nature has to do with the subject as such and as a whole. In real freedom, the subject always intends himself, understands and posits himself. Ultimately, he does not do *something*, but does *himself*. The foundational freedom is not a freedom *from* but a freedom *for*; it is responsibility drawn toward, and realized in, the love of God and neighbor. The experience of this freedom directs us toward the moral ideal and a corresponding sense of moral obligation."<sup>14</sup>

In this quotation, Salzman and Lawler affirm that striving toward freedom which is outside of oneself builds wholeness within. In *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, Catherine LaCugna adds that "the freedom of the deified human being consists in being free-for, free-toward others, poised in the balance between self-possession and other-orientation."<sup>15</sup>

The tension between self-actualization and self-transcendence is vital and must be maintained. Sachs writes of the personal nature of freedom with "freedom is the capacity to



choose who I am going to become as a person”<sup>16</sup> and “each of us is becoming a certain person in a process of self-actualization which takes place in the concrete choices he or she makes throughout life”<sup>17</sup> which both speak to the individuality of freedom. This, however, must be held in common with an orientation toward others. Sachs writes:

Life is found only in relationships with others. To be alone is to die. Our basic desire for life and fulfillment is what leads us outside of ourselves. Freedom is the capacity for such self-transcendence, the power to reach out beyond ourselves. We desire to know about other things and persons and to be in life-giving relationships of love with them.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, while already balancing self-actualization and self-transcendence, how does human freedom call us to be in relationship to one another, especially within the context of romantic loving relationships?

#### IV. THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

We are fundamentally relational beings. We are also fundamentally transcendent beings, as Karl Rahner affirms in his concept of *Vorgriff*, which is “a preapprehension of infinite reality.”<sup>19</sup> Anne Carr portrays the Rahnerian concept of this pre-knowledge and orientation toward the infinite with:

We realize that no single cause, whether biological or cultural, entirely explains us to ourselves. We know ourselves as the product of numerous forces outside ourselves and yet as more than the sum total of ethnic origins, parental relationships, or social backgrounds. Our questioning of each single explanation we can find leads us to a place in which we stand outside ourselves. In opening ourselves to the unlimited horizons of such questioning,

we have already transcended or gone beyond ourselves, and beyond the limits of any particular question or explanation.<sup>20</sup>

This is why relationship with God and relationship to one another are so important. In being oriented to the horizon, to that which exists in the infinite, the unreachably beyond us, we are led to our own fullness. We can never be self-contained units. God has created us to be so much more. In the same way that a person can know much of their own self by observing their hands, watching the movement of their own fingers, and listening to one's own thoughts, that person can never see his or her own face directly. What single body part is more fundamental to a person's identity than their own face? And yet, we can only recognize ourselves by what we have seen outside of ourselves, in a mirror, reflected in others, reflected in God's image. So too does a portion of our own humanity, our very identity, reside outside of ourselves, in the people around us and in the infinite horizon.

Understanding this more complex construction of human freedom, how then do we grow into mutual wholeness with our romantic partner? To truly and fully be open to and supportive of another person's fullness—in a way that is non-constrictive and non-coercive— may feel like a nearly inhuman task. If we believe that we are all called to live into the notion of human freedom that beckons us into our fully actualized self, we have to also expect and support the people around us as they move into this light as well. It can be humbling to consider that the people in our lives and specifically one's romantic partner have an existence outside of and beyond oneself. To live and grow into a mature relationship, it is necessary to be committed to becoming the best version of one's self while also committing to assisting the other person to become their best self. In some cases, this mutual self-actualization will draw a couple away from one another. That is something that needs

to be respected. The couple in love must be committed to the other and hopefully they will bloom and grow independently in the same direction, facing the same light and facing each other. To extend this botanical metaphor, the relationship is not healthy and must be ended when one grows in the shade of the other or when one is choked out by the weeds or tendrils of the other. In romantic relationships, it is necessary to recognize the other person's best qualities and to support and insist on them in all situations without fitting the other person to meet one's own needs.

Throughout all of this is the fundamental importance of self-giving. The Trinity establishes the perfect model of self-gift. There is difference and diversity in each person in the Trinity, which models a relationship of total self-giving and complete openness to the other, for there can be no real self-giving between two things that are the same.<sup>21</sup> We must be able to give ourselves in fullness to our life partners, our companions, our soulmates. This will often be a fullness given over time, and this type of relationship will not be easy. There will be many times when one partner experiences brokenness, and needs the support of the other person. In these difficult times, the strength of commitment—the everyday dedication—will be made known.

In the most basic sense, theological anthropology and human freedom's contribution to love and relationships can be summed as follows: I cannot and will not be with someone who wants me. I cannot and will not be with someone who needs me. I will choose to be with someone who chooses me and who will continue to choose me, in the best and the worst iterations of myself. In all the versions of ourselves we have lived in the past, are embodying now, and will enfold in the future, we will choose each other. This is because at their core, both human freedom and mature, romantic relationships are fundamentally entwined in commitment, since "we are freest when, no longer torn in different

directions by multitudes of possibilities, we can at last surrender to one of them whole-heartedly.”<sup>22</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Kiersten White, *The Chaos of Stars* (New York, NY: HarperTeen, 2013), 258.
- 2 Mary-Lou Galician, *Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media: Analysis and Criticism of Unrealistic Portrayals and Their Influence* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), ix. The twelve myths include 1.) Your perfect partner is cosmically predestined, so nothing/nobody can ultimately separate you. 2.) There’s such a thing as “love at first sight.” 3.) Your true soul mate should KNOW what you’re thinking or feeling without your having to tell. 4.) If your partner is truly meant for you, sex is easy and wonderful. 5.) To attract and keep a man, a woman should look like a model or centerfold. 6.) The man should NOT be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, less successful than the woman. 7.) The love of a good and faithful true woman can change a man from a “beast” into a “prince.” 8.) Bickering and fighting a lot mean that a man and woman really love each other passionately. 9.) All you really need is love, so it doesn’t matter if you and your lover have very different values. 10.) The right mate “completes you”—filling your needs and making your dreams come true. 11.) In real life, actors and actresses are often very much like the romantic characters they portray. 12.) Since mass media portrayals or romance aren’t “real,” they don’t really affect you.
- 3 There is a noted heteronormativity presented in this work from Galician. An important field of additional research that falls outside of the scope of this paper would be on popular societal considerations, norms, or narratives in homosexual relationships. That being said, I believe that the section to come on theological anthropological considerations on love and romantic relationships is non-heteronormative, and could be appropriately applied to any relationship between mutually committed persons.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 201-210.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 39.

7 Cathy Troupp, *Why Do We Fall in Love? The Psychology of Choosing a Partner*, u.s. ed. (New York: St. Martin, 1995), 2-32.

8 Ibid., 3.

9 Laura Sessions Stepp, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 5-6.

10 The response I have seen in academic writing as well as general discussion on the topic of hook up culture often heads toward sexual shaming, particularly of the young women involved. I find this is to be deeply troubling. The study of human freedom certainly lends itself to a critique of hook up culture. However, I believe that properly applying this notion should focus on the shallowness of a persistent, long term lack of (or fear of) commitment, rather than on the presence of sexual activity/a sex life/sexual needs. A robust understating of anthropology includes that humans are social, emotional, intellectual, and *sexual* beings. We each explore our sexual selves differently and have varied sexual needs. As such, there is certainly a space for theological anthropology to critique hook up culture, but from what I have read the argument often bends toward critiquing the number of sexual partners and the young women involved, and thus towards “slut shaming,” which is not only unfortunate but also harmful.

11 Stepp, 7.

12 John Randall Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology*, Zacchaeus Studies. Theology (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 28.

13 Ibid., 31.

14 Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology*, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008) 95.

15 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, Harper Collins pbk. ed. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 290.

16 Sachs, 29.

17 Ibid., 30.

18 Ibid., 31.

19 Anne Carr, *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and*

*Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. O'Donovan (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 21.

20 Ibid., 19.

21 Lacugna.

22 Sachs, 31.