

## I. Intro: falling in love in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade

I first fell in love when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It happened on a trip to Quebec with my French class. It was my first travel experience without my family and I loved absolutely everything that happened- the hot chocolate in bowls at a café, staying with a host family who didn't speak English, walking under the saucy stares of the curious students of the school we visited, and even the long bus rides. The bus rides were fun because you were stuck with everyone in your class and there was no other distraction from just being engrossed in one another. There was nowhere to go. I sat with a boy! A boy I had a crush on! And as we spoke, and giggled, and whatever else, I began to be able to *see* him. You see, he had a 'reputation.' As a troublemaker, someone who wasn't safe, someone who was reputed to have 'done things.' But I could see a funny, wide awake, sparkling soul who felt that the entire premise of our education (and maybe our society?) was suspect. I felt myself dissolve into the soft Canadian sky flying by in the force of the beauty I could see in this person. I fell in love. I wrote a letter to him, when we were back in Amherst, declaring my undying love and exhorting him to believe in himself and not be defined by the labels our town had for him. I found out, recently, that he has kept the letter to this day.

Ok, why am I telling you this story from my tender years?

Because Paul's theme for us today is endless love, childhood moving to adulthood, and being known and seen.

## II. Endless love

Let's start, as Paul does, by reflecting on the nature of love. First, he makes it clear that love is the supreme pursuit, the ground of anything else we ever do, and the measure of all value. He's pretty strong on this: "if you do not have love, you have nothing."

Then he gives this list of characteristics- patient, kind, not arrogant, not irritable- followed by a list of love's ability to bear, believe, hope, and endure all things. It seems to describe a love which begins with a generous view of the one we are loving and becomes a love which opens into a view of "all things." If you can look with patience and kindness, and slip free of your own crankiness, you can fall into a universe of boundless possibility.<sup>1</sup> A central stream of energy that is the power source for all things hopeful and good.

And Paul says it never ends.

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<sup>1</sup> BTS' repeated use of falling through space and time, through the universe, in the moment of falling in love. (DNA, Serendipity, Magic Shop, Blood Sweat and Tears...) Also love without object, and repeated reference to cosmic and unending nature.

Now, we might say, wait, but love does end. Falling in love with someone by no means you live with them happily ever after. And love's ending is one of the great sadnesses and griefs we are confronted with. So what can he mean?

I noticed that his description of love doesn't have an object- so I'm wondering if he's talking about the phenomenon, the Love itself as the object. Is it less about the particular instance and more about this kind of sky-opening-falling in love as a kind of **way**? An orientation of being, a pattern for living. In this way, love is not the kind of thing that ends. It is constantly being renewed, refreshed, re-iterated. Even, perhaps, if we go back through our treasure chests to our past loves, I bet you can find that, if you take out that old memory, that you still have some access to the love that was there. Love never ends.

III. Then I thought like a child, now I am an adult.

Paul is describing something he wishes us to know, to seek, to pursue. He thinks this love, this endless source of power of possibility, is the key to following Christ, the key of the Gospel. He thinks endless love is the way to more complete knowledge, more complete vision of the world. Now, he says, our knowledge is limited, but in love, we can move ever and ever closer to

clearer knowledge, clearer vision. Love is the means to a kind of emergence connected to a more expansive, more generous view, a way for us to evolve as individuals and as a community.

He thinks we need to grow up into it, he says: When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

He doesn't elaborate on what characterized the "childish ways" he put an end to. It seems he is contrasting childish ways with adulthood, where adulthood is getting us closer to a deeper understanding, and childhood is something to be discarded.

I feel as if we generally accept that the movement from one set of ways to another, a kind of "leveling up," is something that happens once, with childhood contrasted with awakening into adulthood. I wonder if our sense that this kind of story is confined to adolescence limits our knowledge and vision. In other words, if we seal off this kind of story as a childhood relic, we risk losing access to the endless love which is our best, most divine power source.

Instead, can the memory of that precise moment of falling in love fuel us to sharper vision, greater hunger, and more capacity to look generously on the world and let go into a love which can do and believe and see all things?

And indeed, if we are pursuing a pattern of love which endlessly repeats is it not likely that we will be offered this movement from one thing to another many times? Then perhaps childhood and adulthood are not so much ranked states as they are banks that frame the river we cross over and over on the bridge of love.

It's part of why I thought this story of my first love seemed a good illustration- a moment directly in between childhood and adulthood. It's a moment where the "childish ways" of being totally circumscribed by my regular routine fall away, the moment of encountering that sexual/ romantic world that is the territory of adulthood, and a moment where my knowledge, my ability to see, was radically opened. It's both precisely a story of adolescence- a specific and singular moment in the life cycle with only one direction of time and consequence- and it's also the birth of a pattern.

#### IV. As I have been fully known

The moment of falling in love gives us a glimpse of the complete, and is in that sense timeless. But is also passing, and the moment's transience compels to keep seeking it, revisiting our experience of it. The sense of its passing draws us forward, becomes a hunger that keeps moving us.

Paul also says just this one phrase in the past-complete tense: amid all this, “*then I will know, then I will see, then it will be complete* he says “Even as I *have been* fully known.”

For of course love is bound up in seeing, in recognition, in knowing. And if there is one person in the universe it is especially hard to see, hard to know, and hard to love, it is none other than my self.<sup>2</sup> Yet we have to find a way to love our selves- we have to. It's in Jesus' central commandment- Love your neighbor *as your self*. Our inability to love ourselves, our inability to know our selves, is an impediment to our love of the world. So how lovely, how restorative to imagine that we have already been known, already been loved. That there is One who has fallen in love with us, who because of that love can believe and hope in us despite knowing us!

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<sup>2</sup> See all of BTS Album Wings, and the 3 Love Yourself Albums for the exploration of this theme which is inspiring this reflection.

