

Love Means Treating Every Day As Valentine's Day



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Valentine's Day will soon be here (as if we didn't know it). There are red and pink hearts splashed everywhere we go, in virtually every store and every magazine. There are shelves piled high with cellophane-wrapped heart-shaped

chocolates begging to be given to someone special. We are encouraged to buy red roses' or cuddly teddy bears clutching chocolate kisses, or spend three months' pay on a sign of love that will last forever.

I've never been a big fan of Valentine's Day. Odd, you might say, especially for an intimacy expert.

Maybe it started when I was in the third grade, and the whole class was supposed to exchange those inexpensive packaged valentines. Technically, everyone should have gotten the same number of cards, but some kids invariably received more than others. I remember sending Billie Riley, the cutest boy in the school, a special valentine on a lace doily that I made myself, and how sad I felt when I didn't get one in return. I think that's when I began to learn that love wasn't always fair or easy.

So, let me apologize in advance to those of you who look forward to the

delivery of helium-filled balloons that publicly proclaim "I love my wife" or "World's best husband" — even though there may be little warmth expressed in private. I also apologize to those who love this day and might be saying, "Lighten up and enjoy it! Didn't you say 'something is better than nothing?'"

Of course it is. I'm just concerned about the pretense of another holiday, about the 11th-hour scramble to find a card from among the picked-over remains, one that's not too silly or sentimental, one that suitably expresses your feelings. This can be especially difficult if you've not been intimate with your partner since you exchanged last Valentine's Day's promissory notes. I'm concerned about the partners afraid to go home empty-handed. It matters more than the fact that they feel empty-hearted. Any card or box of chocolates will do to avoid an argument. That sounds more like fear than love. Perhaps it's a little of both?

I'm also more than a little concerned that we've been sold on how to be romantic.

What is romance anyway? Is it candlelight? Taking bubble baths? Walking hand in hand on a moonlit beach?

Restaurants will be packed on Valentine's Day, with more than a few couples sitting in silence or looking around, barely acknowledging one another. Many of them will appear to be waiting for the romance to "happen" as

they periodically glance at their watches, politely sipping their wine while waiting for dinner to be served.

If we're honest, Valentine's Day is challenging. It's an opportunity to ask questions about the substance of our intimacy, not merely a time to exchange romantic formalities. If we dare to look, it can confront us with the partner we may not have hugged, loved or appreciated in any palpable way during the past year, or longer. But like other "celebratory" events that push us with their expectations, we may robotically comply and also learn something in the process. I think anyone who has loved knows that romance isn't in the champagne-glass-shaped hot tub or in the "frisky ferret" you purchased from that sex-toy catalog. It's in the experience of connection, which is impossible to gift-wrap.

I can't help but feel a smidge of guilt for raining on anyone's Valentine's Day parade. If you love this holiday, more power to you. There are people who are delighted that there's at least one day a year dedicated to love. I'd like at least 364 more days.

And what if you're single? Is Valentine's Day only for lovers?

One of my clients once referred to it as S.A.D. (single's awareness day). If we are to celebrate the meaning of the day, then it is for everyone. It's a day to remember to love — mothers, fathers, grandparents and friends. Maybe we should give cards to the bank teller who always smiles, to

the supermarket checkout clerk who bags the cold stuff separate from the hot — we appreciate them all.

Love, romance and intimacy are in the details. It's a smile, a touch, remembering to bring soup home for your lover because he or she has a cold. Love isn't synonymous with chocolates or diamonds (although both are certainly nice). It lives inside of us, and the celebration is always going on, if we choose to listen.

So, enjoy Valentine's Day, in any way that suits you. If you use Valentine's Day to jump-start your romance, bravo! After all, we love one moment at a time, and this may be the start of a loving year.

My wish for you on this day — and every day — is that you find a way to make your romance real.

If you want the key to your partner's heart, ask what would make him or her feel loved on Feb. 14, or on any other day, and listen to the response. It may be as simple as paying more attention, or looking into each other's eyes when speaking.

But most important on Valentine's Day, I encourage giving each other your most precious gift — time. Take a few minutes to share how your lives have been enriched by one other. Even if the love has faded, it was there once. The love doesn't leave; we leave the love.

Instead of buying into the commercialism of yet another holiday, let's celebrate the spirit of the occasion. You don't have to be Elizabeth Barrett

Browning to ask, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways . . ."

You just need the courage to acknowledge your love. Once we've admitted how important another person is to us, we have to risk losing that love someday. That's just how it goes.

"And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." — the Beatles.

This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Case material used here includes composites and is not intended to represent any actual couple or individual.

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The Doctor Is In

■ Dr. Herbert Keating's "First Opinion" column will appear Feb. 18 and 25 this month.