

SOMEHOW



THOUGHTS
ON LOVE

ANNE
LAMOTT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

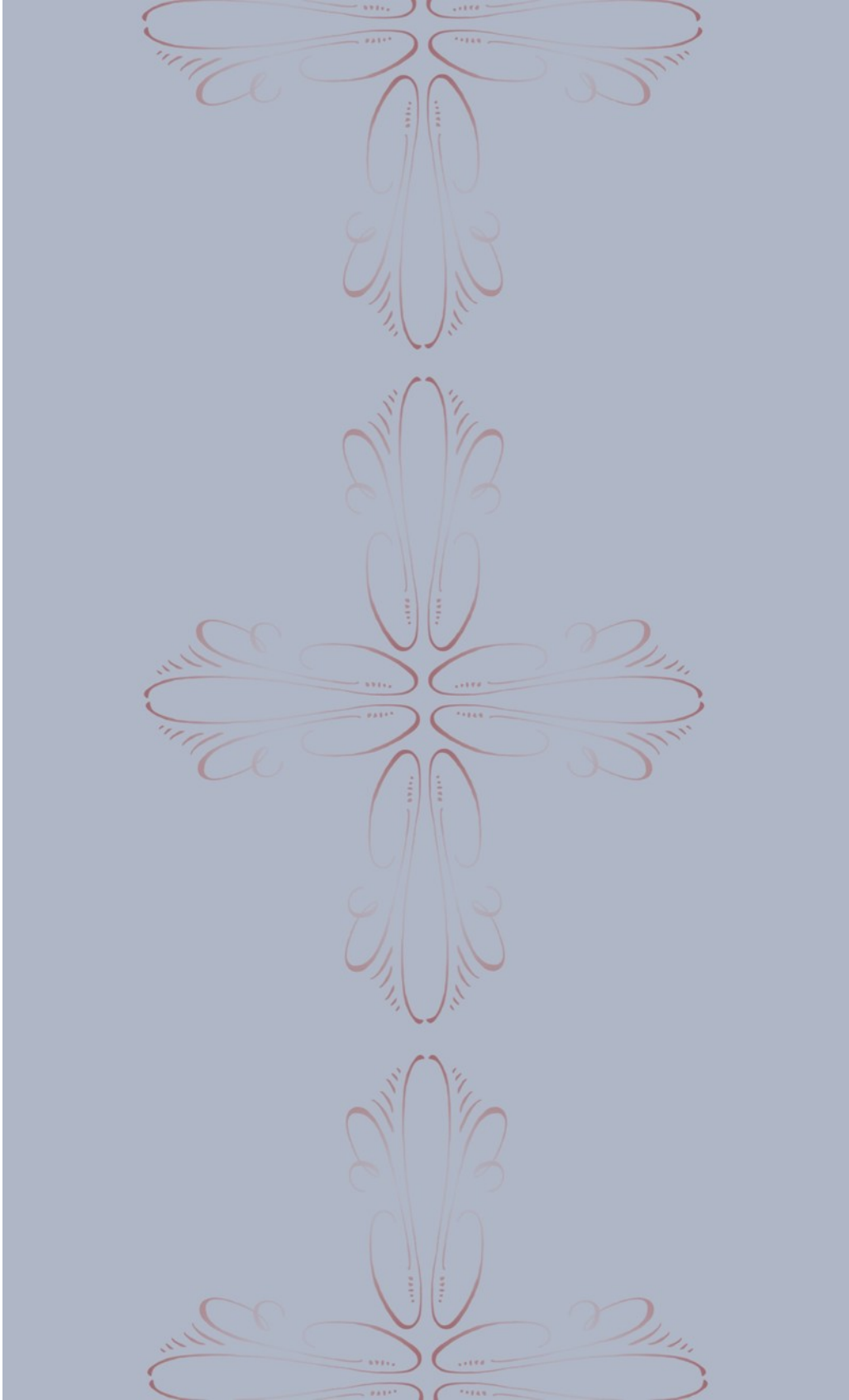
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ALSO BY ANNE LAMOTT

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FICTION

Hard Laughter
Rosie
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All New People
Crooked Little Heart
Blue Shoe
Imperfect Birds

Somehow

THOUGHTS ON LOVE



Anne Lamott



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

~ RUMI, translated by Coleman Barks

Overture

My husband said something a few years ago that I often quote: Eighty percent of everything that is true and beautiful can be experienced on any ten-minute walk. Even in the darkest and most devastating times, love is nearby if you know what to look for. It does not always appear at first to be lovely but instead may take the form of a hot mess or a snoring old dog or someone you have sworn to never, ever forgive (for a possibly very good reason, if you ask me). But mixed in will also be familiar signs of love: wings, good-hearted people, cats (when they are in the right mood), a spray of wildflowers, a cup of tea.

What are we even talking about when we talk about love? What is it?

I asked a six-year-old friend of mine.

“Oh, it’s just this *stuff*,” he said, rolling his eyes.

I think that’s right.

Love is caring, affection, and friendliness, of course, compassion and a generous heart. It is also some kind of energy or vibration, because everything is—the same stuff moving at different speeds, from glaciers to six-year-old boys.

I wish the movement of love in our lives more closely resembled the grace of a ballerina, but no, love mainly tromps and plops, falls over and tiptoes through our lives.

Love looks like us, and that can be a little daunting. Love is why we are here at all, on the couch and in the world with a heart for the common good, why we have hope, and a lifeline when we don’t.

There is sweet family love, entangled by history, need, frustration, and annoyance. There is community love, a love of music, Zorba's reckless love of life. It can be vital or serene. There's the ecstatic love—for the natural world, or in bed—there's the love of justice or the radical transforming love of what we might call Goodness, Gus (the Great Universal Spirit), or God.

Love is often hard, ignored, or hilarious (eventually). Love looks like you—to me and a few others. And this is the hardest thing to believe.

One thing is certain: Love is our only hope. Love springs from new life, love springs from death. Love acts like Gandhi and our pets and Jesus and Mr. Bean and Mr. Rogers and Bette Midler. Love just won't be pinned down. Love is Florence Nightingale and Coyote Trickster, who messes with us by way of his teachings about how we might possibly, grudgingly, awaken to the glory of life. Love is the warmth we feel in the presence of a favorite aunt, the kindness of a waitress, and the warmth of the hand that pulls us back to our feet when the loss of love has all but destroyed us. It is this stuff, which any kid and most poets will tell you we experience in our hearts.

Nonsense, you may say: love arises and is regulated in a part of the brain called the amygdala. How right you are, once again! And how happy that must make you, as it often does me, and why I so need the intervention of love. Do I want to be right or to have a loving heart? And will this be on the test? My brain also controls my breathing, but man, do I love my lungs.

On a ten-minute walk anywhere—from outside my gate with its broken latch to the loudest block in Brooklyn to Garbage City in Cairo—love abounds and abides, flirts and weeps with us. It is there for the asking, which is the easy part. Our lives' toughest work is in the receiving. Love presents most obviously in babies and kids being cuddled, yet also as patience with annoying humans we live or work with or are. We feel love upon seeing our favorite neighbors and first responders, we see it in fundraising efforts, peace marches, kindergarten classrooms, gardens. When flowers don't stir feelings of love in me, something is gumming up the works.

In a ten-minute walk from home the other day, I passed a house with a new baby, another with a recent death, then two houses down a loud argument between a usually devoted couple; an English garden, an abandoned shack behind woodpiles on a desolate lot, boxes of bees buzzing honey into existence, and terrified parents chasing after little kids careening away on their first two-wheelers.

I have lived in this neighborhood for nearly two decades, and I know every house on the block. I have nursed a woman and her small children through her way-too-early death and been there for the family across the street when their twenty-one-year-old child jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. On our first date, I brought my future husband home to the house where, seven years earlier, my nineteen-year-old son had brought home his first child. We helped raise Sam's boy in the tiny grassy park right across the street. (Nana and Neal are tree-huggers.) I stood in the same street with my addict son in 2011 with a sharpened pencil held near his throat and told him he could not come back until he stopped using, and then welcomed him back a month later with ten days clean and sober, twelve years ago tomorrow. We in the 'hood isolated during COVID and walked six feet away from one another as lovingly as we could, waving. Waving can be love, as well as stop-and-chats and shouted compliments on their camellia bush. We did what we could to help one another and the very poor a few miles away. Our ninety-year-old neighbor Jesse passes by on his walks every day. Way too many arrogant and ecstatic bicyclists race too fast past him and me on their way to the water district ponds, where flotillas of ducks paddle by and egrets stand looking like Bernie Sanders with their unruly haircuts and posture. Our dogs had their last meals of hot dogs and ice cream here in the corner park on their way to whatever awaits us all, breaking our hearts forever until we brought our next dogs here to meet the team. We stood outside on days before elections and promised each other that the unthinkable was not going to happen, and then when it did, we met here again the next day, clutching our heads.

A few minutes' walk from my front door, unhoused people come to sit on a memorial bench in the shade kitty-corner from the park, one of whom

is my woolly friend Ben. The neighbors pile giveaways on the bench—clothes, egg poachers, and baby gear—infuriating some neighbors, who vent on Nextdoor about the unsightly mess, but a blessing to others—i.e., to me. This bench itself was carved by a towns person long ago—live-edge and beautifully rustic. It holds us all: me, Ben, Jesse.

When we are paying attention, we see how much holds us invisibly. Love is a bench.

There are two benches in the little park and eight redwoods. Tightrope walkers set up their wire above the grass and practice for hours. Older people faithfully do tai chi early in the day. Dog people sit together and catch up while their dogs run and play. One small dog ran into the street recently and got hit, but she lives on joyfully with three legs. After dark in the summer, teenagers get drunk and stoned here and then drive away, leaving their litter behind. My grandson has just turned fourteen and because I love him more than anything, my heart is often in my throat. Love can be very scary. In fact, love is actually scary about half the time.

Menace abounds. It was 107 degrees out today. We smell the smoke from distant fires. Men steal our catalytic converters while we sleep. Men who were not shown love do terrible things in the world, and love shows up as volunteers, nurses, best friends. Love shows up with food and antibiotics. Love shows up with tea.

Years ago my friend Caroline found a small frog in a shower that was being remodeled, so she picked it up and carried it in her cupped hands to the wet grass outside. The frog was leaping in terror against her hands as she carried it, and probably did not understand the quiet comforting words she spoke to it along the way. I think this is one of the best examples of how love operates when we are most afraid and doomed, carrying us to a safer place while we pound against its cupped hands.

I teach my Sunday school kids that love is God and God is love. The God of my understanding is baffled by what *isn't* love. It's unfathomable to God to imagine not loving. The Dominican friar Timothy Radcliffe wrote that God can never tell you not to love someone. God can only tell you to do a better job loving someone. (God is somewhat better at this than I.)

Love is interconnectedness. We grew up learning that tree roots are always competing for space and nutrients, but since then we've learned that beneath the ground is a lacy network of communication and help. Redwood roots spread in shallow, interlaced webs barely under the surface, keeping any single tree straight against the wind. If one tree gets sick or harmed, other trees send it their nutrients and supplies. Love is a root system. (Trees are better at this than I am.) But I see all around me that we evolve, slowly, over time, often in community. The Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin believed that against all evidence, we are all evolving toward Christ consciousness, but maybe if he had lived in the modern scientific age he might have tied in tree consciousness, toward oneness and sharing. And maybe they are the same thing.

Love is evolutionary, survival of the species. Not-love is killing us.

Maybe love is our very atmosphere, the one energy that Einstein describes as being that which is the only thing there is. This would mean that love is like Wi-Fi, always and already here (if a bit wobbly sometimes), sight unseen, until we look around and begin to notice and use love's atoms and agents, the one-dimensional vibrating strings with which all life is composed. Maybe love is a radio station that we can tune to, when we can turn away from the crack cocaine of news and the internet to Bach and sambas and "Taps," to melodious sonnets and the Beatles.

One walks along mulling over old hurts and new ways to save and rescue family members—good luck with that—and ingenious schemes for alleviating the national political madness, world starvation, disease, tribal wars. Love often looks like grief. Love seems to be good friends with death, although I would prefer it was better friends with comfort and mirth. Love is compassion, which Neal defines as the love that arises in the presence of suffering. Are love and compassion up to the stark realities we face at the dinner table, and down the street, and at the melting ice caps, or within Iranian nuclear plants and our own Congress?

Maybe; I think so. Somehow.

Love's loss is the source of most suffering, and then love transforms the suffering into depth, compassion, and the great painful gift of humility. I

never love this. One day at a time, and sometimes one hour at a time, love will be enough to see us through, get us back on our feet and dust us off. Love gives us a shot at becoming the person we were born to be, not the charming actor or bodyguard we became, not us on our tightropes holding our breath as we strive for greatness (or at any rate not falling on our butts). When all is said and done, and against all odds, love is sufficient unto the day.

Could I be wrong? Obviously. But I don't think I am. Love is what our soul is made of, and for. Love is a piece of toast and a diamond. It is a sturdy and imperfect shelter, all around and deep inside, a lantern with warm bracing light, a magician. When life has lost its promise, or disappointed us one too many times, when it is hard to trust again or feel alive and curious again, love beckons us over and asks, "Got a minute?"

What is there to lose? A lot—familiarity, complacency, the illusion of control. And what is there to gain? A chance to loosen up and lighten up and sometimes even live it up, a chance to feel the warmth of this gentle, wild, messy, holy world. So I'll ask you, too: Got a minute?

ONE

Swag

Hell in a handbasket was the good old days, back in another century when smog and Nixon were the emergencies. What can I leave my son and grandson by way of general instructions for when I am gone? What has consistently worked to lift us and light the way during the inevitable times of deep darkness?

There is a story I live by, which I have been telling my Sunday school kids for thirty years now, and which they never tire of, or least have the good sense to still pretend to enjoy if they have any hope of getting snacks. A young girl is having a hard time falling asleep one night and calls out for her mother. Her mother comes in and gently tucks her in again and assures her that Jesus is there in the room with her, so she needn't be afraid. This goes on and on, each time the increasingly annoyed mother saying basically the same thing until finally, in the dark, the little girl says plaintively, "I need someone with skin on."

This is the main instruction that I would leave my family in my swag bag of spiritual truth: be goodness with skin on. Most days this will be enough. Also, be sure to plant bulbs in the winter, help the poor, and light candles in the dark to see where you are, where you've been, what remains, and how much still works just fine. That last one will amaze you.

We are called to be the love that wears socks and shoes, like God's Love We Deliver, the secular group based in New York City whose volunteers bring food to the sick and dying. I have "GLWD" inscribed on the ring I wear on my right hand so I can remember that if you want to have loving

feelings, do loving things. You take a bag of canned food and Oreos to the nearest food bank. You call your cranky uncle to say hello and stay on the phone even after he goes into full weirdness. You foster old pets or donate to people who do. There are nearly infinite ways to be love in communal expression. Our church came up with another good one.

We've had a gorgeous, exuberant new preacher for the last two years named Floyd Thompkins, who is huge in heart and soul. He and the deacons at our tiny church came up with the idea of putting together bags of supplies for the unsheltered in our county, with necessities like shampoo, socks, and dental floss. They did not ask where people without shelter would find water for showers, or the sudden desire to floss. "Figure it out" is not a good slogan. (This would also be a line in my metaphoric swag bag.) They would just give them out freely, like at the Academy Awards.

One Sunday we arrived at church to find not only our oldest elder, Laurretta, taking our temperatures at the door, but also a pile of lavender bags, big ordinary plastic bags, with no branding anywhere. Lavender is a color of royalty, of calming and fairies—ask any little girl. And each bag was filled with items the deacons believed would enhance a person's life.

My lifelong cross to bear has been secret derisive judgment, a pinball machine of sizing up everything and everyone. I am working on it, but the healing is going slightly more slowly than one would hope. So I swallowed my sense that this was ridiculous, took three bags on my way out after service, and threw them on the floor of the back seat of my car.

When I got home, I lifted one bag and noticed that the light shone through it. Peering in, I saw there was actually some thoughtful stuff in there, including a porkpie hat. Some days that might be the only shelter a homeless person had, a kind of roof. It was a very ordinary hat, with holes in its brim so you wouldn't get too sweaty. It was foldable and the label said it was broad-spectrum. I liked that. If we broaden our spectrum, we would see everyone as family, even the craziest "Christian" Congresspeople (theoretically), and obviously refugees and the homeless. These are people and we are all human, made of Big Bang stardust. That's the broad spectrum that we need.

Also, I noted, the hat was water-resistant, a good thing because who knows what might come out of the sky and land on our heads? The bag also had in it two pairs of black socks and some personal hygiene products.

I left the bags on the car floor and did not think about them for a few days, until I saw a scruffy man on a bench on my way home. I pulled over. It was Jesus in His distressing guise as a man in a tattered down jacket in 90-degree weather, smoking.

I got out of my car with my purple bag of love and a bottle of water. I could smell him from ten feet away. I've read that Indigenous people sometimes let layers of oil build up on them from the environment and a little sacred dirt as a form of protection. But, dude, I wanted to say, come on! We are in a busy little hippie bourgeois town.

Luckily for him, I had body wash.

"Hi, I'm Annie!" I said to him. He chewed on his chapped lip as he looked at me. I smiled gently. "I have something for you, because I know that it must be hard to always have things on hand when you need them. Can I sit down?"

He looked anxious, which is appropriate if a nice Christian lady approaches you clutching a big lavender bag. But he moved to the far end of the bench to make room and I sat at the other end. I put the bag between us. He peered over and down, as if off the side of a cliff.

"It's a bag of stuff I put together that everybody needs every day." No judgment here; everyday things for everyday people.

I took out the first item, the toothpaste. The man looked at me askance, like I was offering him an enema bag.

"No, thanks," he said and stubbed out his cigarette on the bench.

I had a tiny position on this, on creating wood burns on handcrafted live-edge benches, when he could have just as easily stubbed it out on the ground. But I kept my Church Lady mouth shut.

Instead I reached inside for the toothbrush and floss. I began babbling out of sheer anxiety. I sounded insane. "Teeth are an incredible problem, aren't they?" I asked. "Cavities, gum disease. And I have to wear this stupid Invisalign retainer on my bottom teeth to correct some teeth that shifted. It

hurts, and I have to sit in the orthodontist's waiting room with eleven-year-olds. Hah hah."

He gave me the side-eye but didn't get up, as I might have at this point. And I had many more thoughts: Colgate is a good brand, with a fresh minty taste. And this tube had what it said were Smack Plaque properties. I say smack that damn plaque!

"No, thank you," he said, and lit another cigarette.

I sat quietly beside him, secretly huffing the secondhand smoke, keeping my horrible judgy thoughts to myself. Can't we all agree that flossing says your mouth is worth it? And I personally enjoy it because it's kind of contemplative, twanging that string up and down, a cat's cradle of oral activity.

We sat in silence in the sun. Then he lunged for the whole bag, put it in his lap, and started pawing through it. Now I was getting somewhere. He took both pairs of socks and handed the bag back to me.

"That's all I need," he mumbled, and got up to leave.

Wait, what? Did he think I was a 7-Eleven? I wanted to say, "You can't just take that. You have to take the whole bag! There's a system." Instead I said, "So glad you like them." And I was. Really.

I bought some socks to make the bag complete for my next client, but I didn't see any other street people for a while. I really hoped to see my gentle homeless friend Ben, whom I've known for years, but weeks passed and I didn't. I asked around. Everyone knows and loves him—well, except for the parents of the teenagers with whom he plays guitar and smokes dope. He's probably in his late fifties but could be an old forty because that is what street life does to you. I always ask if he's eaten that day and then give him a ten or whatever I have on me. Had he moved away, or even died?

Street people die. One of my Sunday school kids, Michael, became homeless after he graduated from high school; he went to live in a community under a bridge near the harbor two towns over. Some of us from church stayed in touch and tried to save him, but he didn't want to be saved. Then, early one morning, he got shot. The last time we talked, he called