

**“Will the Real St. Valentine Please Stand Up?”**

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**The Cherry Tree Carol**

The young girl opened her sleepy eyes as the morning sun was filling the bed room. She rolled over and looked up at the ceiling and the glass cover of the light there. Her last memory was of that light going out as her mother had tucked her into bed the night before and turned it off on her way out.

Now light filled the room once again and all of the daytime sounds were starting to filter into her ears. Just then her father walked into the room with a big wide smile “Good morning honey.” He sat down on the side of the bed and looked into his daughter’s eyes smiling a warm and happy smile. “Will you be my Valentine?”

“What?” the little girl answered. “Will you be my Valentine?” her father asked once more.

“What is that?” she asked again.

He smiled and proceeded to tell her just what Valentines Day was, and thought he might also explain leap year and those traditions, but thought better of that—considering that she was just three.

Well, I don't know if you can remember the first time you learned about Valentines Day; but that point in your life did happen.

Perhaps so long ago you don't remember. And if you do, I would bet for most of you it was a cursory explanation at best. After all how much detail are you likely to be interested in at three or thereabouts?

For me, I first remember hearing about Valentines when a girl came up to me in the school yard and asked if I would be her Valentine. It kind of scared me and made me think a bit as well.

I was confused because Valentines falls 12 days after Groundhog Day, often on Chinese New Year and three days after the day Gandhi was assassinated on Feb 11<sup>th</sup>. It is also two days after Lincoln's and Charles Darwin's birthday Feb 12<sup>th</sup>, the day after my birthday (Feb 13<sup>th</sup>), and a week before George Washington's birthday on Feb 22<sup>nd</sup>. None of this is terribly romantic, true but all important information for me and that I had in my head about February. I was raised Unitarian Universalist remember?! So

naturally I wondered why anyone would stick Valentines Day into such a month already crowded with significant events?

Of course I eventually discovered the reasoning and that I had it backwards actually. Valentines Day did have first claim on February with the single exception of Groundhog Day, which actually, I was to learn has more connection with Valentines Day than cherubs or even cupid do.

No one is actually quite sure how we got to celebrating this particular day the way we do. But if you look far enough back at the origins we know about the surprising thing is that it still seems to support a core meaning of the ancient celebrations, in its own modern way. I say modern because the idea of courtly love, romantic love doesn't even enter into cultural contexts until the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Valentine's Day, however under that name, only goes back to the fifth century, and was all about one of three St. Valentine's at the time, all martyrs of various kinds in early Christianity. All with their own mythologies and fables; one was martyred in the coliseum, they don't know how, a lion was the preferred way at the time but no record. One was a bishop who was also martyred in the

early days of the church by the Romans and the other who seems to fit our contemporary bill the best, was a priest who was executed for performing marriages for young soldiers before they went off to battle against the decree of the emperor. And we still don't actually know which one of these was the one the Pope in 469 declared to be the St. Valentine's of the Feb 14<sup>th</sup> recognition. The church doesn't even have record of this.

So "Will the real St. Valentine please stand up?"

And actually this is not surprising because this was the way the church operated in its formative years. When it saw an opportunity to co-op another old pagan ritual it jumped on it.

And Feb 14<sup>th</sup> had long been a day of rituals and various offerings going back to the early Greeks and other pagan traditions, which had recognized Feb 14<sup>th</sup> as the day birds started to pair up. Not unlike the cross quarter mark we know of as Groundhog Day, this was another one of the signs of early spring. Rituals of fertility and sexuality were practiced everywhere on Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>. In old Greek culture it was a celebration of Pan the god of wine, food and sex. It was the time young women were invoked with fertility by wrapping their bodies in fresh skins of sacrificed goats. This

celebration reached back into pre history and eventually continued under the new manifestation cupid in the growing Roman culture. So as you see the true nature of this day still hangs on, all-be-it tempered a bit. But not unlike the eggs in Easter, and the tree in Christmas. The ancient meanings of this day play out. A perpetual story of life and nature like a river forever rolling to the sea.

### **Run River Run**

It is wonderful and interesting both how these kinds of inherent truths, written deep in the core of our beings never seem to get completely buried, or forgotten in the onslaught of competing cultural, theological and political tides. No matter how hard we try to use them in the service of our own personal stories and greed or fear, they seem to hold their ground.

They get obscured and often lost mostly because we are told not to look for them; because if we do, they are right there.

All of us have known that wonderful time when we were soaring and pairing up with others sailing in the same updrafts. That marvelous and belly tingling sensation of holding the key to eternity.

And in truth that is exactly what it is. That keystone to this time we all experience at some point in our lives. And when we peek behind the veil, we can see the bright and luminous truth there that we are, like all life, here to love and to sing the songs of an eternal tomorrow.

And when the time of sensual phosphorescence has passed the lessons remain, etched deep through as many lives as you care to recognize—the marvelous experience of the deep truth of love fills the urn, carried even deeper into the savory understandings of our lives and our loves.

### **The Waters Wide**

So the message of this Valentines Day, for me, comes through the clouds and in the blue wisps of sky between. These things that tell me in the depths of my spirit that the time for the birds to pair is here; not that it is coming but it has arrived!

I don't know how many of you have watched a pair of eagles pair off in the early spring, or red tailed hawks, but if you have you

know that life is meant to be in joy, and that in the journey to endless tomorrows is where the secret of the laughter happens.

We have these days like Valentines Day which are always with us, even if the names are changed to obscure the truth of their messages. And this one, this pairing of the birds day, this “Will you be my Valentine?” Day persists so that we will not forget to count not on the illusion but on the experience of love, life, and the grace of joy. To remember that in the end if we do not do it in love, for love and truly with love, it will not hold and it may not work.

Therefore, love is an experience of a lifetime. This is an ongoing gift which should be treasured beyond all others. To have such choice as love and to receive such blessings as to be loved is what makes this dance of life so magical and such an eternal journey.

Whatever age, love seems simple. We can love the way a special pillow feels under our head, or how the summer, or the winter make us feel; we can even love the story of Jack and the Bean Stalk, or Green Eggs and Ham. But when we partner with a lover, or birth a child, or put another grandchild on our lap, it is yet a whole other experience. Valentine’s Day, is about recognizing that

and all the ways we love each other in family, friendship and relationship.

“Love, love, love – love, love, love –all you need is love; love is all you need.” John Lennon said that.

“If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.” Steven Stills said that.

“So love is the gain; love is the pain; love is the reason we do most all we do in joy!” I said that.

### **Give Yourself to Love**

Ultimately, it is all about giving yourself to love. In the final hours of a lifetime a grandfather lies in his bed to watch the disappearing light. He finds that the memories of events and people likewise are fading with the sun. And yet he smiles, remembering those with whom he gave himself in love.

Into the room he calls: “Will the real Valentine please stand up?”

Not just one, not just two, but many, including his dog, arise from the shadows and reach out to him. He laughs and knows that life has been good.

And so may it be for you.