



The Mystery of Love

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Q&A with Joan Konner Executive Producer, *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE*

What is the genesis of *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE*? How did you come to produce this program?

I kept seeing and reading stories of romance in the popular media that did not match or even connect with my experience of love in life. I started to re-search the subject many years ago and came to realize that in a sense, every life is a love story and romance is just one of those stories. I realized there was a great deal of insight into and understanding of the subject in countless books by researchers, psychologists, psychiatrists, clergy, artists, authors and that there was almost no reporting of this important thinking in the mass media. As a journalist, I wanted to broker at least some of the information and ideas into the popular culture and to put a deeper and wider understanding of love on the public agenda.

Along with your husband, Alvin Perlmutter, you produced *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers. How did your work with Campbell affect your thinking about love?

The most important thing that the Campbell series made me recognize is the enormous public appetite for programs that address their inner lives and their subjective experience. It is as if huge numbers of people are looking for more insight and illumination into the common, even the collective, personal human experience. Another important revelation was how much of an untapped resource there existed for understanding this most important experience of Love in our lives. In the entire series, Joseph Campbell talked about love for just one half-hour, and I knew immediately there was so much more to be explored about the subject that we did not have the time to discuss in that series.

Isn't the popular media filled with talk about love? Movies, television shows, music—love seems to be the main topic of conversation. How is your program different?

In movies, magazines and on television, we see mostly one kind of love portrayed—passionate, sexual romance. These stories create an illusion

that a person will find love in an instant—across a crowded room or on some enchanted evening. In that sense, romantic love is the Holy Grail of our time. Everyone is taught, tantalized to seek that magic instant moment of love. The truth is that this story of passionate sexual romance is perhaps real for a moment in some lives, but more commonly it is making most lives miserable because it is a fantasy. It is a distortion and corruption of the positive force of connection that sustains a healthy life and a healthy society.

What are some of the consequences of the way the popular media portrays romance and passion?

The way the popular media portrays romance and passion encourages people to look for love in the wrong direction, in all the wrong places, thereby creating frustration at the very least and hopelessness at worst. It is not just the popular media but the popular commercial culture that promotes a fantasy of love that is near impossible find, instead of the possibility and reality of love that is present or potential in almost every moment.

Why would you say love is still a mystery?

Love is a mystery because it manifests in so many different ways in individual lives. It is a need and fulfillment; it is a necessity and yet a choice; it is freedom and limitation; it is joy and it is sorrow. Love is a paradox, both a gift and an obligation.

I tend to think of love as the energy of connection. It is the positive force that holds things together. Sometimes it is a spark and sometimes a flame. It is our purpose, I believe, to pass it on, to keep it alive, between individuals in its many manifestations and in community.

How can *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE* change this conversation?

By acknowledging love as essential presence in the experience of being alive.

How is forgiveness a part of love?

In *THE MYSTERY OF LOVE*, we see the very moving story of Azim Khamisa which exemplifies the transformation that forgiveness can create in a person's life and see love created where otherwise there might have been

despair. Azim's son was murdered by a gang member. Through prayer and meditation, and through his Sufi Muslim belief that it was his duty to create spiritual currency for the soul of his departed son, Azim was able to regenerate his interest in life. Also, he formed a deep and lasting friendship with a man, the grandfather of the murderer, who might easily have become his mortal enemy.

Can a person really understand love and live a life filled with love while not being married or in a committed one-on-one relationship?

To paraphrase C.S. Lewis: There is no hierarchy of love. All loves are connected and every love is as important as every other love—from love of strawberries, to love of pets, to love of work, to love of nature, to love of God, to love of another person. So yes, there are many kinds of love that give shape and meaning to life.

Is passion and intense romance an integral part of love?

It is one kind of love along the continuum of love and connection.

Many people have friends, but often don't think of that in terms of love. How is friendship an important part of love?

I believe that if there were a hierarchy of love, friendship might well be at the top. Real friends are people we are close to but who do not make demands, who have no expectation of something in return for the friendship. They give of themselves and of their time and require no reward or return. Friends are those we are able to share our lives with, people to whom we feel connected, people about whom we fantasize least and to whom we are willing to give without obligation. Too often in this culture we don't give friendship the honor and respect it is due, the honor of calling it by its rightful name, although there are many stories of friendship in legend and mythology that indicate that friendship indeed may be the purest kind of love of all.

In one segment, Dr. James Hillman talks about the shadow side of love. How can love have a shadow and how does it manifest in today's world?

In physics, we see the laws of opposites in operation, and we accept that, have to accept it, because it has been demonstrated. Yet we tend to think of

love as only positive without its negative and opposite force, its shadow. Hillman says one might not see this in a marriage relationship until the marriage hits the divorce court. Nevertheless, most people recognize that love can cause pain as well as pleasure and usually does. That pain of loss or hurt in love is a manifestation of the shadow of love. We certainly find the world as a whole cast in the shadow of love today as war and conflict rages beyond control in too many countries.

I see our politics today acting in and as the shadow of love. I even think our economic system is a manifestation of the shadow of love. Power struggles and competition define our times, even as most of us have a natural need for connection and community, a sense of belonging and inclusion, not exclusion.

There is a lot of talk about "unconditional love." What is it? Can any of us achieve this?

Unconditional love is a love that knows no limits, no matter what the circumstances. It is an ideal, but in reality one rarely sees it. Each of the authorities in *The Mystery of Love* acknowledged that in most instances, love is conditional, based on life circumstances—sometimes social, sometimes political, sometimes economic and most often, on personal differences. Even the parents' love for children is more conditional than one might want to expect, although the love of a parent for a child is often the most forgiving.

In today's world, we see many examples on the political stage of anger, rage, violence, and war. In these cases, love does not appear to be accessible. How can a deeper understanding of love affect these bigger issues and problems?

I would say that we could start with one step if each individual became him or herself a manifestation of love in the world. Beyond that, I wish I knew. I wish our leaders knew. Our leaders, even, and maybe especially, our religious leaders whose religions command them to love one another as well as the enemy, appear to be more the keepers or creators of competition and conflict rather than love.

As W.H. Auden, the poet, who is quoted in the program, said: "We must love one another or die." He understood that love is an imperative, lest the human species become extinct. It certainly appears we are headed in the di-

rection of extinction, what with global warming, nuclear proliferation and evermore weapons of mass destruction, with no one or anyone willing or able to get them under control.

In your own life, how has the concept of love grown and changed over the years?

I would have to write my autobiography to answer that question.

Nevertheless, as the opening line of the program says: “Every life is a love story.” I certainly can see my life that way—as a daughter, sister, woman, wife, mother, friend, grandmother, colleague, leader, lover of work, lover of nature, lover of home, lover of country, lover of food, lover of ideas and more. Each different kind of love is a different jewel, a spark of connection woven together in a web of love. One thing I know is that my ongoing research into the subject of love, some might say my obsession with love, has made love—its presence, its absence and its obstacles—more visible and tangible to me in my everyday life, in any and every setting, especially in news and public and cultural affairs.

