

Love Is Not Affirmation

As I've navigated social life in Gen Z, I've realized how much contemporary "love" centers on personal affirmation. We "love" others, modern thinking says, by affirming their desires and actions—by submitting ourselves to their perceptions of what is helpful and good. The social expectation today, especially in the younger generations, is to always validate others' choices.

But actual love is much more than simple affirmation. Certainly, appropriate encouragement is often helpful, but consistently, uncritically agreeing with another's actions and desires can easily cause more harm than good.

Affirmation as Disservice

To examine this issue, here's a helpful thought experiment: Suppose you live in an obscure home on the east coast. The house is small and old, and your backyard overlooks the sea. There're not many other homes for miles around, so the road to your house is unkempt and complicated. In fact, to get to the house, visitors must pass a dangerous fork in the road. One side of the fork leads to your property while the other side leads to a blind turn at the edge of a steep cliff. Everyone who takes the second fork will almost certainly end up dead.

With that in mind, is it unloving to tell your guest *not* to take the second fork? Or, if they do end up on that dangerous path, is it unloving to turn them back? Yes, you might be going against their wishes—perhaps they want to see the autumn trees and the blue-gray sea bordering the second road—but, ultimately, you would be saving them. In this case, affirmation is not a service; rather, affirmation would be a great *disservice*.

Love That Looks Like Hate

In a similar way, some forms of love don't always feel good, at least not in the moment. Sometimes love manifests itself in uncomfortable ways, even venturing to explicitly deny the desires of the one being loved.

I'm reminded of practicing piano in middle school, an activity that often involved my mom sitting by the piano bench and guiding me slowly through each of my songs. It was long and tedious: I'd often play the wrong note, and she would have me play the measure again. She made sure I knew my pieces perfectly before she drove me to my formal weekly lesson.

At the time, I hated the monotony of practice. I'd rather have been playing outside, reading a book, baking bread—*anything* but that constant repetition!

Looking back now, though, I realize that my mom's persistence in guiding me through practice helped me in substantive ways. No, she wasn't giving me what I wanted—that would've harmed my musical development and kept me from competitions and recitals I could participate in later in my life. Still, she was serving me. She was doing what was best, even if she had to endure a disgruntled 10-year-old to get it. In the moment, it was challenging for the both of us, but ultimately, it was loving.

Even beyond our personal lives, we see this conflation of love appearing in the broader culture. One example is gender ideology requiring agreement and compliance with a person's self-identified gender or sexuality in the name of "love." Another example is the demand to call obese people [healthy](#) and not criticize their weight. Is it really loving to tell people who are morbidly obese that they are healthy? This has alarming implications for whether [doctors](#) and other professionals can speak important truths.

Love as a Meta-Virtue

A friend of mine once described love as a meta-virtue: It oversees the other virtues, and it shows itself in different ways depending on the situation. And in each situation, love protects, guards, and seeks the highest good of another. Its primary duty is not to affirm but to guide. It focuses on what is good—not within the subjective experience of the one being loved but within the objective circumstances of the world.

Though 21st century ideology has done much to erode the concept of love, we are not required to submit to this ideology. By recognizing that love does not necessitate constant affirmation, we can avoid using untruth to retain our relationships. Rather, we can seek the highest good of those around us, working to affirm or disagree with others when necessary.

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