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April 15, 1986 (letter 14)

Dear Colleague:

Spring is the time to talk of love, so let me do so. At a dinner party I managed to steer the conversation into this topic. A female guest declared her love for her child and said that she would not hesitate to sacrifice her life to save her child's life, and added that this would have been an instinctive act, as natural and easy as breathing. A male guest then volunteered, with a wonderful lack of self-consciousness, the strength of his love for his teenaged son. Everyone smiled in recognition and approval. It occurred to me how common this parental love is. What about erotic love and fulfillment? That too must be extremely common, although perhaps the experience is more likely to be marred by frustration because it requires a high degree of reciprocity, which is seldom attainable. As La Rochefoucauld put it, "Entre deux amants il y a toujours un qui aime et un qui se laisse aimer." Still, as a fleeting experience of ecstasy it is no doubt very common.

Now, if love is so common it ought to show on people's faces. Fieldwork is in order. I walked up and down State Street to see whether this is in fact the case. To my disappointment, faces that shone with the joy of love were rare; far more often I saw tired and withdrawn faces. Puzzled at first I was then struck by an obvious answer. The answer came to me by way of an analogy, which proves once again how important analogical thinking is in social science. Most people on State Street are modestly and even shoddily dressed, but it is by no means true that most people are poor. Even affluent people dress modestly because in our society it is in bad taste to show off. Likewise, most people on State Street are rich in experiences of love, but good taste forbids them from showing off--from wearing their happiness like gold cuff links--when much poverty still exists. In other words, faded jeans and tired faces are evidences of consideration, badges of good manners.

Years ago I had a nightmare which remains to haunt me. I expired in bed one summer vac. The room fell silent suddenly. I looked at the electric clock by my side and noted that although the hands still moved the clock had stopped humming. After the initial shock I thought that being dead was not so bad except for the worry that my body might not be discovered for a long time. Hours or days later, I heard the sound of keys scratching my apartment's door. It was the cleaning woman. I had forgotten about her. No, she must not come in. I could not bear the image that I had conjured of her innocent entry, vacuum cleaner in hand, and then her terrible shock. I jumped up to warn her. No! That won't do. I woke up. How unsatisfactory it is to think that one's last involuntary act is to interpose "a slovenly unhandsome corpse," betwixt the wind and posterity. I sympathize with Hamlet who wished that flesh could "melt, /Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew." But this is such a pagan sentiment. Cleanliness, we used to say, is next to Godliness. Now that Godliness is no longer compelling, is cleanliness the only ideal left?

Best wishes,

J. M.