

What love also is

Beloved person,

Last summer, on a beautiful holiday day, I walked along the shore of Normandy, at Utah Beach. The sea was calm, children played cheerfully in the water, people enjoyed the sun and each other. As I walked there, I could hardly imagine that at this very place so many people once gave their lives. That the ground I was walking on was once soaked with blood, full of chaos, fear, and suffering. From this violence, peace emerged. When I let that sink in, a disconcerting question came to me: was this also love, a love that demands profound sacrifices?

I love to indulge in the comforting colour of love. That colour of gentleness, beauty, and tenderness. The feeling that warms, is near and gives light. Perhaps also because I grew up with that image: as something beautiful, something good, something that makes life lighter. But as I grow older, I notice that this is not the whole story. That there is also a side of love that grates, where I do not naturally feel at ease. It is part of it too, but I prefer to dance around it. I try to soften it, understand it, work it away... Let alone dare to call it 'love.' Do you recognise this?

When I try to empathise with the other side of love, I have to think of Kahlil Gibran's words in *The Prophet*¹. In his words about love, he writes with a vulnerable honesty about the many faces of love. That its paths can be heavy and steep. That it can hurt you. That it makes you grow but also cuts. In an adaptation of his work for children, this also comes through: *'For love can smell like a blooming jasmine, but it can also lash you like a winter shower or blow you over like an autumn storm.'* His words move me because they do not shy away from how raw love can sometimes be. In his words, I feel how love is both a blessing *and* an ordeal at the same time.

Perhaps it is already an act of love to recognise that love shows itself in many forms. That we can love someone and at the same time know that at some point we must let go. That sometimes, peacefully avoiding someone may be the highest thing achievable. That longing can fade, that loyalty can sometimes hurt, that love sometimes asks not to help. And that it is also love to remain gentle with yourself. That you do not always have to be strong or patient. That it is okay that you can no longer manage something, that you fall short, are angry or tired, or have no words for a moment. That love also lives *there*. It helps not to push that away, not to justify it, but to give it a name. Because precisely by recognising that failure, loss, distance, and confusion also belong to love can provide relief or space.

In that space, something new can also emerge. Not always something beautiful or easy, but something meaningful. A deeper connection with yourself, or with others, or with life itself. It depends on what you are struggling with, or where life invites you to go. It takes courage to engage in this with yourself or the other person, without knowing exactly where it will lead you.

Perhaps that is love: learning to respond to what life asks of us over and over again. Sometimes gently, sometimes abrasively, sometimes empty-handed, but always driven by love. I am grateful that there are places where I can practice and explore this, precisely in uncertainty. Where there is space – or where space can arise - to live those questions (which are not simple) with people. A place of practice, where I can reflect in peace and silence on my own answer.

With a warm-hearted greeting,

brother Marten van der Wal



We remember our baptismal vows

¹ Kahlil Gibran, 'The Prophet', translation by Ernst van Altena (Amsterdam, 1994)