

# LOVE AND DEATH: WHEN THE CATFISH ARE JUMPIN'

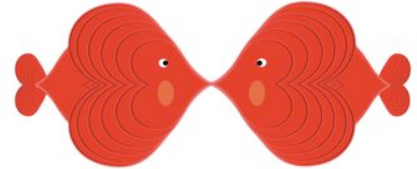
A REFLECTION FOR SAINT VALENTINE'S DAY

*Wise men say only fools rush in,  
But I can't help falling in love with you.*

Pop song by Mercer & Bloom, 1940

A popular football star falls in love with an online fantasy girl who doesn't exist in real life. Unwittingly, he entrusts his heart to what is nothing more than a figment of his imagination, and the cruel hoax by those who would take advantage of his vulnerability and naiveté.

As many more of us have now learned in this brave new internet world, the phenomenon is known as "catfishing;" where bottom-feeding predators fabricate online identities, in order to trick people into emotional relationships, or worse. And it's as easy as shooting fish in a barrel, because everybody loves somebody sometime.



But as in the case of Notre Dame football star Manti Te'o, *catfishing* eventually comes to an end with the inevitable break up and subsequent heart break. In this case, Manti is informed the girl of his dreams who has never existed has died. His fans and friends hitchhike on all the emotions that swirl around such a tragic tale of love and death. Who could doubt his feelings of affection were real, despite the fact the object of those affections was not?

If there's a lesson here for anyone who might take the risk to love and lose, it may well be that when it comes to our adventures in romance it is good for the lovelorn to remember that even in the "real" world, when it comes to our most intimate relationships there can be a big difference between projection and reality.

In many years of ministry, offering pastoral counseling to couples who asked for a little objectivity in their troubled relationships, the two most common, well-worn delusions I repeatedly heard in one form or another was, "I thought he'd change," and "she's not the girl I married."

Of course no one stays the same, I'd tell them; that is, if they're still breathing. But that doesn't necessarily mean someone will change for the better either (whatever one thinks that *better* might be)! Once we all got clear on who the other person actually was -- and wasn't -- it was a lot easier for them to decide what to do about it.

Or, as the old Crosby, Stills and Nash song goes, "If you can't be with the one you love, honey, love the one you're with." Chances are, at least the one you're with is *real*.

*As the old Crosby, Stills and Nash song goes, "If you can't be with the one you love, honey, love the one you're with." Chances are, at least the one you're with is real.*

I share these comments as one who has tried loving and losing more than once, and probably even exaggerated a bit when it came to my own fishing tales, filled with unrealistic expectations and projections. I suspect like everyone else, I've known how exciting courtly romance can be; with the risk of vulnerability, and what the late-Scott Peck used to refer to as the "neurotic breakdown of ego boundaries."

But like Peck I've also come to appreciate that love is less a feeling sometimes, and more a vested act of making someone or something else to be of more importance than one's self. So on Valentines Day, it may be helpful to remember how it all began.

In ancient Rome, February fourteenth was the time young men chose their sweethearts for the spring festival. Fearing potential conscripts for military service would prefer a little romance to trudging off to war, Claudius II forbade the solemnization of such marriages during his brief reign (268-270 CE). When a priest at that time named Valentine defied Claudius' edict, he was thrown in prison and condemned to death.

As the legend goes, while Valentine was in prison awaiting execution, he befriended the jailer's blind daughter with kindness. As a result of an act of selfless compassion towards another, the girl miraculously regained her sight; just in time to read a farewell note, signed simply, "From your Valentine."

The fanciful tale does not say if Valentine had any romantic notions for the sightless girl. It does suggest however that just as human passions are impossible to forbid for long, neither can acts of loving compassion be banished. To the contrary, such love is not blind. Hence, Valentines Day is as much about such acts of love – even in death – as it is about the romantic mush more commonly associated with the observance.

At the same time, when it comes to my beloved who is very real indeed, I am well aware it is only the finest Belgium chocolates that constitute a perennial edict that is to be neither defied, nor ignored.

*...just as human passions are impossible to forbid for long, neither can acts of loving compassion be banished.*

© 2013 by John William Bennison, Rel.D. All rights reserved.

This article should only be used or reproduced with proper credit.

To read more commentaries by John Bennison from the perspective of progressive Christianity and spirituality go to

[\\*http://wordsnways.com](http://wordsnways.com)

<http://thechristianprogressive.com>