

When I was little, every year on March 22nd, my siblings and I would take a sabbatical from noble pursuits such as teaching our stuffed animals how to do “the Worm” to write my parents a card for their anniversary. Some years, we’d make them the most lavish of presents: an old cardboard box with its brand name scratched out by black sharpie, empty except for some defunct batteries, discolored pennies, perhaps a plastic pearl, anything we could scrounge up from the crevices of our house. All that which posed mortal danger to the vacuum held infinite potential for expression of love to us. But as with most presents, the true gift was not the actual items, but the journey taken to procure them -- the sacrifice of sticking our tiny arms into the recesses of the black leather couch, potentially brushing its cold steel skeleton (or, heaven forbid, a spider), to emerge, victorious and dusty, with an errant button. We’d present the box -- eyes brimming with pride, thinking our daring odyssey self evident -- as we declared, “Happy 3-22! We love you!”

I don’t know if it’s normal for kids to celebrate their parents’ anniversary, but my parents’ anniversary has never been typical, anyway; they don’t mark the day of their first date or their wedding day, instead opting to celebrate the first time they said, “I love you.” The way they see it, no other moment in their relationship was as monumental as expressing those words, which of course represent overflowing emotion and commitment, but more importantly to them, choice. In our house, love is the highest gift one can give, because of the intention in it, because of one’s continual ability to -- and ultimate decision *not* to -- revoke it.

This is not a new concept; just before the turn of the century, the feminist writer bell hooks wrote, “To love somebody is not just a strong feeling - it's a decision, it's a judgement, it's a promise.” It’s a powerful sentiment because of its reframing of love as something we can exercise agency over, when usually we feel at the whim of unpredictable emotions. But taken to an extreme, it implies the inviability of unconditional love. If love is truly a choice, then it can be unchosen at any moment, if a person fails to live up to some set of standards. Growing up, I believed this, internalizing my parents’ opinions as incontrovertible truth, as I did with gravity and other forces that immerse without leaving room for rebuttal. But it grew in me a silent anxiety, knowing love could be taken from me if I failed to be perfect.

In high school, this anxiety manifested in rage towards my mother. The hallmark of my teenage years was screaming matches between us, punctuated by door slams reverberating throughout the house as if trying to shake the pennies from its crevices. I told myself, if she didn’t give me her unconditional love, she didn’t deserve mine. But on a deeper level, I knew loving her would have meant accepting her despite her faults, despite her unwillingness to love me back, and I was scared to discover that I wasn’t kind or courageous enough to do that. In choosing not to love someone, one evades seeing their own imperfections reflected in how they might fail to honor that intention.

Years later, I sat down with her to share with her my feelings, and to my surprise, she admitted that her children were the one exception she made to her rule of conditional love. Part of me wondered if her hesitation in expressing that earlier came from a similar place of fear -- fear of

the daunting task of loving unrestrainedly, even when it contradicts one's values. I found myself yearning for the days of bright-eyed childhood, when loving someone was simple as presenting bits of garbage to them, proud and unabashed.

We are born with not an obligation, but an invitation, to love. Our charge is to wrestle with the weight of accepting that invitation, of stepping into the vulnerability of letting our faults surface in our imperfect love. But ultimately, it matters less that we love perfectly and more that we choose to love at all. It matters less that we stand at the altar with rosy vows and say, "I do", and more that we say "I love you", even when it's hard, even when we've failed each other. It matters less what we put in the cardboard box, whether a yellow marble escaped from Hungry Hungry Hippos or a worn grey-pink pencil eraser, and more that we choose to roll up our sleeves, pull out the cushions, and stick our arms down into the dark unknown -- not knowing what we'll come away with, but confident the effort is enough.