

Here's the Thing by John Reilly

My younger brother, knowing that I'm a considerable yet rather discreet fan of Bigfoot reality TV shows and documentaries, once said to me...

“You know what I don't understand? Why is it that every time an eyewitness stumbles across an eight foot tall, 800 pound monster while hiking through the woods, they all seem to react exactly the same way - ‘Quick! Go grab the fuzziest, most unstable, least reliable camera you can find, so that we can prove to the world that Bigfoot really exists!’”

I was reminded of this anecdote when I saw the topic for the Sharon Reads Together Writing Contest – the great white whale of conceptual philosophies - Unconditional Love.

It is a term I am very familiar with – growing up in a large Catholic family and having degreed from both Stonehill College and the University of Notre Dame, I am steeped in both the theory and practice of God's Unconditional Love. Abstractly speaking, can there be (is there) a difference between real (human) love, and a love that is unconditional? One could debate that every love with a partner is littered with conditions. In other words, if the most human of expectations you have for a relationship (fidelity, reliability, decency) are violated and your love understandably dissolves – was that love ever really unconditional? Or was it always based on certain intrinsic and implicit human conditions?

There is even scriptural merit in debating the biblical concept of unconditional love. For if God's unconditional love were defined by the fact that he gave his son's life to save us, then his unconditional love can be further distinguished as a saving love. Yet the gospel clearly states that not everyone is saved (Matthew 25:46), so is Jesus indicating that those who “...go away into eternal punishment” suffer so because of conditions not met for “eternal life?” And, if so, is that not a condition for God's saving love? The Bible says we are justified by faith (Romans 5:1), but is faith not a condition?

Here's the thing. The biblical verses will always offer room for academic interpretation. But through 26+ years of marriage what I've learned is that the concept of unconditional love is a little like stumbling upon a Bigfoot in the middle of Olympic National Forest in the Pacific Northwest. The picture of what it really is will always be a little blurry and it's never going to be quite camera ready. But human love is clearer. Because it's a melting pot of life's sensations - gratification and bedlam and hilarity and excitement and unpleasantness and disorder and enjoyment and satisfaction and, most of all, authenticity. And if you can pour all of those emotions and passions into a mixer and come out on the other side with someone who accepts you and loves you without judgment, well then maybe what you've found is not an unconditional love, but a nonjudgmental one. And that definition works for me.

So grab, aim and (please!) focus your cameras.