

Love You. Not

Am I the only person who is put off by the habit of ending every conversation among family members with a quick, enthusiastic “Love you!?” I understand where it comes from, I think; generations of dads (and sometimes moms) inhibited from ever expressing emotion; people on their deathbed worrying, omg; I never told the people I loved that I loved them (or, conversely, Dad never told me, etc. etc.); the people who felt that making that kind of statement implied weakness, or would lead them farther than they actually wanted to go; also the people who desperately wanted to be able to say things like that but JUST COULDN’T.

How far that pendulum has swung! Thanks to our embrace of intensive parenting and maximum spousal involvement, some of us end every exchange, even if it is just about who is going to pick up the dry cleaning, with an up-tempo Love you! in case, God forbid, on the way to said dry cleaner the person is run over by a bus. There will be no regrets in this family! The person will be trapped under the filthy, mammoth bus wheel, blood pouring out, thinking not: I hope the medics get here in time, but rather: thank goodness those were the last words I said to my (ungrateful child/judgment-impaired spouse/lousy parent.)

But death by bus is just so unlikely! What is probable is that this reflexive protestation of our deep feeling and commitment becomes just one more way that family members must measure up; one more thing to feel guilty about. We take the worst case possibility, grab onto the anxiety it produces, and make a virtue of the anxiety itself; assuming that the worse we feel, the better it demonstrates our parenting bona fides. Our blood pressure rises, and stays elevated; arguably causing more harm to more people than the occasional runaway bus.

I may have mentioned this anxiety drug business once or a hundred times before. So let's address the particular Love you! epidemic. I object to it from both ends -- from it being too obvious, and from it not being obvious enough.

1) If Love you! is the new see you later, bye bye, or ciao, it becomes formulaic, therefore meaningless. (Good bye, everyone seems to agree, is a 16th century contraction of God be with you; the God sliding over into good because of the otherwise standard good morning or good evening. And we know that hardly anyone these days is thinking about God when they are saying good bye.) If good bye has become meaningless, I love you is still fraught with meaning. And yes, I know that Love you! is only two words; perhaps meaning something altogether different from the so much longer and more didactic three word refrain, but I do think you can make the case that the shortened version is just an updated version of the longer one, although, in leaving out the "I," the verb and object sort of wobble around without much sense of agency.

If you are, like me, an avid reader of advice columns, you know that, for lots of people in new romantic relationships, the timing of the first utterance of those three little words assumes enormous proportions. Did the newly beloved say it before he/she could really have meant it? Did one person say it much sooner than the other? Did one person say it and then not have the satisfaction of having the other person say it right back?

Or, in the long-established couple: What if one member is having an affair? Not signing off to your spouse with the expected staccato Love you! would be a big tip off. Or what about the times in any long term relationship when you are not at the affair point, but you are just plain annoyed or tired or bored? Do you want to start a whole to do by not saying what is expected? No; you just want to get through the evening, or the day, and hope that things will feel better tomorrow.

What about the entire block of, let's just say, the teenage years? It can be hard to dredge up the catchy phrase when what you are thinking of is something more along the lines of I would like to wring your neck. I know that the sign off is meant to remind us that, no matter how annoyed we might get by a person's behavior, deep inside we really do hold them dear. But do we want to be reminded of it all the time? Sometimes we want to just enjoy our little funk.

2) And really; if our loved one is asking us to take out the trash on the way out, but does not tack on the "Love you!" at the end, do we really think they don't actually love us? This is what makes me nostalgic for the pre- Love you! age, when we took part in activities that we either had no interest in doing, or actually disliked, only because they provided a way to be close to a parent, child, or spouse. In those bad old days, we pathetically handicapped love-expressors could only do things, not say them. ("C'mon, Son, let's throw the ball around.") Such a set up is good for skills-building, if nothing else. And the scenes at funerals! "He showed me how to hang a picture on the wall!" "We played Parcheesi together!"

3) Call me cynical, but I can't help but thinking that you Love you! people protest too much. If you know it and feel it, why do you have to repeat it a dozen times a day?

4) And how about specifics? Better than the vague endorsement would be some recognition of what we actually love about a person. *I love the way you put your toys away before I even had to ask you* (all right; self-serving), or *I love the way you are figuring out how to get more enjoyment out of your job*. And there is always the fallback: *I love how I feel with you*, although that veers dangerously close to the expectation of reciprocity.

We all relish knowing what we mean to those around us. We are all like cats, purring when our Important Others take a moment to smooth down our fur.

5) Mr. Rogers had it right. “There are many ways to say I love you,” he warbled. “There’s the cooking way (one example) to say I care about you....” I can hear the teenager muttering to himself, after the zillionth repetition, yeah; if you really loved me, you would (and here you might use, as an example, some useless and overblown gesture that you can recall from your own teenage years.)

6) Love can feel like the lowest common denominator. Of course I love you (or you love me); this about family members whose guts we may hate at that very moment; whose politics make us ill, whose choice of clothing style, or mate, is deeply disturbing. At that level, what is the point?

7) Actions speak louder than words. And I say this as a professional wordsmith. Throwing the ball around does have its virtues. It gives you actual face-to-face time. It provides you with an activity, a skill; something that you can do together/work on in tandem, so that you are not just focusing on the damn relationship. You get to act out the love, rather than just say it. Because, and here let me throw out another truism: talk is cheap.

8) So yes, I may Love you! And you may Love me! But, in the end, what are we going to do about it?