

## Annette

Love has a name. I discovered its meaning only when I chose to offer myself 35-years-ago to this person named Annette. What I thought I knew about love meant little as I bumped up against my selfishness. (I prided myself on a kind of reflective, poetic awareness of love but actually knew next to nothing about it.) In joy and especially in her tears, Annette invited me to love her because she was worth it. I wanted to do so. Though desire spurs us onto discipline, they are not the same things. I was flabby in love.

One factor (though by no means the only) involved my homosexual background. Neither God nor I was content for me to muck around all my days bowing before mirror images of myself. I was done being seduced by Narcissus-- mirages of idealized masculinity that lured me only to sicken me. The challenge of conversion is that you start to worship the ONE and in so doing you catch glimpses of what is true about yourself and the rest of creation. That is good. And scary. Pieper is right; maybe we stay sick in order to shirk the responsibility of wholeness.

Annette was a real woman, whole-enough: smart and sophisticated, attuned to others, a God-seeker but bound up inside too, as if she had to earn His love. Annette was dimensional, and I tracked with her; I wanted her but I wanted her on my terms and I cannot say I ever got close enough to anyone to know their terms. Until I entered into Annette's world. Wow. Uncharted territory: would I love the whole of her and 'man-up' enough to offer the ragged whole of me?

A few things helped: mutual sexual desire took a little while, as is often the case when one has SSA. The pleasure we found in each other's bodies developed in the context of a growing relationship; the more we disclosed about our lives and trusted each other, the more we desired each other.

And Annette was easy to desire. She possessed an ease of being, an integrated gift of welcoming others into her life. I marveled at how she could open the door of her heart to persons she trusted and display a range of emotions with an immediacy that at once drew me and challenged me.

It helped to place Jesus at the center of our communion. That may have been slightly defensive on my end but in truth, Annette and I wanted Him and His will above all else. As Annette discovered more about the depth of Jesus' love for her and welcomed His Spirit in the core areas of her life (she had a lot of fear-based problems due to childhood sexual abuse), she grew more and more beautiful to me. I realize now that marriage involves body and soul and that the enlightened soul permeates the body and makes it hot. Spirit-filled Annette turned me on.

So in fear and trembling and with great expectations, we said yes to each other. Saying yes to each other meant saying no to everyone else. By that I mean divisive things, like unhelpful advice or other lovers, real or imagined. We took the marriage bed seriously and refused to allow phantoms to insinuate themselves into the bond we shared. Yes, we talked things out, still do, but

out of respect for each other and on the solid ground of trusting each other.

We share a rich legacy in ministry but deeper still is our family life. Annette is the best Mom: she has never flagged at offering herself wholly to our four kids while also giving them space to grow apart from her. We shared parenting from the start, still do—we have discovered that the task morphs but never stops. Raising kids highlights the truth that sexual love is about more than interpersonal pleasure (though for that I am grateful); God intends sex to create other lives. That is why discipline in the sexual realm is so crucial. What you make you must also tend, and what you do privately gets passed down to your kids whether they know it or not. Sex is powerful. That's why chastity means everything to us.

As we move into our 36th year, I notice that we bicker less and accept each other more; we no longer treat misdemeanors as felonies and have dug a deeper well of mercy that we offer one other in unspoken ways. We have weathered a host of hardships together, which has seasoned and tempered our bond. Annette grows in virtue, the beauty of holiness. We do not need to 'talk things out' as much as before. We look at each other's exquisitely lined faces with gratitude after 35 years of life together. We speak words of love to each other. We grow in living those words. Not too hard--I know love's name.