

Speaking an Unashamed “I Love You”

J. Gardner Bonner

I remember the first time I said “I love you.” I had a plan for what to say to my daughter when she arrived: “Welcome to the Earth that God made. Mommy and Daddy love you, but Jesus loves you more.” I had a plan for the first time I said it to my wife. We went to the lake, where we would spend nights bundled in the back of the Jeep after walks and star gazing, talking and learning about each other until the obligations of course work or the rising sun would send us back on our separate ways. I read her a children’s book called *No More Kissing* and gave her half of an orange, asking her if she knew the reason why; the answer, of course, was “Because I love you.” There’s a kind of pit in your stomach when you build up to a moment like that, an ache that starts long before you even make a plan to speak it that you hope upon all hopes doesn’t end in shame or rejection. That heavy, dry hurt starts the moment you are free in the clarity of knowing but are all the while confined by the moment, tempted to keep this secret as long as you can in order not to screw anything up, wanting to preserve all that is good in a relationship. But she wasn’t the first.

I cannot remember ever *not* saying “I love you” to family members, and that doesn’t count anyway. In my family, it’s a given. Besides, that is a different kind of love, formed out of obligation or honor or pride. And the first time is not the same

as the times that my Little-League teammate and I would yell back and forth as we left practice or went inside for dinner, using our best Forrest Gump impersonations, “Ah luhv youu, Day-vid!” “Ah luhv youu, Jo-ohn!” The first time can’t even include the prolific playground “I love you, maaaaaan!” parodies of beer commercials that appeal to children a decade shy of the target market. Even now on Facebook or in text messages, those three words are followed by “bro,” “dude,” “homie,” or another macho, self-preserving equivalent wherein is exposed such a feminized stigma about “love,” and these certainly cannot be “first times,” not as real or imagined masculinities obscure the very essence of an “I love you.”

No, the first time was different. This moment made me feel grown up, an early step in becoming a confident, young man, and that pit of planning and waiting was not there. In fact, there was only an instant when I heard the words first, that so many objections, realities, perceptions, prejudices, memories, justifications, and the like ran through my mind and heart before I voiced those same feelings in response. It was spontaneous, hardly calculated. This was accompanied by an embrace I hadn’t experienced before, either. There had been side-hugs and those masculine, pat-you-on-the-back-real-hard or lean-in-with-my-head-cocked-and-my-fist-pounding-your-back kind of hugs. And at thirteen, I had only really deeply hugged my parents and grandparents, older people with different-sized and shaped bodies than my own. This “I love

you” and subsequent hug meant so many different things than previous hugs and “I love you’s.” Each time the two of us would say it again, it would mean that more time had passed, that we’re uncomfortable having to be apart, that we’re thankful for our memories together, and that we relished being with each other. “I love you” meant “I miss you always, and I long to be near you. You are a lifetime, a full, belly-aching, tear-inducing lifetime.”

I heard some cynics once who said that the person in a relationship who says “I love you” first gives up power to the holdout. I’m not too sure about that. In this case, I felt weaker, younger, and more immature. I felt as if I was being helped up to a new level. A door of communication was opening through which I was able to express something I knew was right. I had never put my love into words.

A spoken word brings to life what was unformed, not even fully comprehended until that point. Acknowledging certain feelings frees expression from self-imposed structures or rigid roles, breaking the mold of do and don’t/be and don’t be.

..

I first said “I love you” when saying goodbye to my friend Adam. It had only been four months since my family

moved away from New Mexico, leaving my closest childhood friend behind and embarking on the disaster that is middle school in Tennessee. Either my parents, his parents, or a combination of the couples paid to fly him out to visit over the Thanksgiving holiday. I was lucky. Adam's parents had let him spend what I only knew as a family holiday thousands of miles away from them so that we could be together. We had lived in the same town for five years and had never spent Thanksgiving together before. This was the weekend he started collecting Stewart's Orange Cream Soda bottles. I would see a hundred of them lining the hanging bookshelves in his room when I would visit him later during my junior year of high school.

The big, family meal was at my grandparent's time-share cabin, and I crammed all the other moments before and after full of showing him off proudly to my new hometown. I beamed when I introduced him to new people in my youth group at church, drove him by my school, and walked up and down Westop Trail. None of my feelings had to do with what I was showing him, but rather that my world was knowing him. When you're thirteen, four months might as well be four years. Life was different.

On Sunday evening, he got on the plane to chase the sun west. The airport in Knoxville has always seemed less than an airport to me—there's only one terminal, and you can never tell if you're in a hallway or a waiting area. The stone on the

façade also covered the interior walls, producing a medieval and cave-like atmosphere that made you just want to drive through the perpetual construction on I-40, east of Nashville instead of fly. Adam sat on the ledge next to the clear and looming window. Windows keep you thinking about possibilities and dreaming or dreading what's out there. They give an impression of closeness to a far off place—that the outside might be close at hand. But New Mexico was not close. The sun was already dipping low, and the blinking lights from planes on the tarmac were the silent rhythms of the dying airport's hospital bed. If there was anyone else getting on the prop-plane to catch a connecting flight in Nashville, I didn't notice them. And, honestly, it didn't matter.

I leaned against the corner at the edge of the window, my back against the sharp rocks, pressing to the point of pain the way that you bite your tongue or pinch your fingertips when you step on something sharp—focus on one pain to try to take your mind off the other one. I refused to look down the ramp that Adam would take to leave my world and go back to his. I faced the rows of black, vinyl seats where my parents sat, giving us the space we needed. I appreciated the distance they provided and knew that this was not the time for sitting in those chairs. That would have been too comfortable too “I'll see you next weekend.”

Adam was wearing a “Knoxville” sweatshirt we picked up together at the local Kroger. Later on when I was wearing mine, a girl at school, acting as a confidante, told me that I should not wear that to school since everyone knew it came from the grocery store. There seems to be a guilt trip that society plays on the innocent, making innocence shameful.

The airline worker at the desk called out for Flight 5782, and I looked at Adam’s blue and white Adidas duffle bag he’d take as his carry on. I knew he had a Walkman with *Free at Last*, *Never Say Die*, and *Project* cassettes as the playlist for the trip home. I picked up his bag and handed it to him. I don’t know what I expected, only wished we had more time.

“Have to figure out something for Christmas, or maybe I can come for Spring Break,” I offered.

“That’s too far away,” he shrugged, crinkling his mouth to the side. I nodded, looking down at my red Converse and lightly brushing the stony wall with the scuffed, white toe of my shoe.

“You have to let me know how it works out with Heather. Keep me posted.”

“Yup.”

I went to shake his hand and got caught mid-way there, hand open and exposed in the island of space between the two of us.

“I love you,” he said, and he opened his arms.

So much of what I thought, and perhaps think, about relationships came from television. I was always on the outside; everything—every experience—was so new or foreign to me. Perhaps this comes from the fact that I am an only child. All but one of the men that I look back on my life and call my closest friends, the ones that I would call my brothers, had their own brothers. Even the one who didn't, had sisters. They knew of a closeness, a bond, that I only pretended to know, only wished for, only had on weekend sleepovers or summertime excursions up the mountains or through the arroyos behind our houses. There is a fear in boys, in men, that at any given moment their weaknesses will be on display, and it is quite confusing that love, even a love removed from romance, between two males is seen as taboo. We call them man-crushes or bromances, but that seems to undercut all of the real feelings behind them, mocking a connection that two people feel, making it a parody of the effeminate or joking at the vulnerability of it all. I see teenage boys and college men alike taking the “I love you, bro” masculine defense to a new level, adding “no homo” to the end of their statement. There is

great fear in being seen as weak or different, and we tend to disqualify ourselves at every opportunity.

I knew that no matter what all else I was feeling, no matter what media and my peers were telling me to feel, that I felt the same way about my friend that he felt about me.

“I love you, too,” I smiled. We hugged. And we grew up.

..

As Adam and I get older, there will be a sense of frustration at the missed experiences of sharing in each other’s lives, because of the separation. We will not go to high school together. We will not cheer each other on in his soccer matches or at my track meets. We will not learn to drive together, go on double-dates, go to Duke together, or, oddly enough, be each other’s best man in our weddings. I will not be able to convince him to study art, and he will not keep me from abandoning a mathematics degree.

One day he will tell me over the phone, “John, I honestly hate thinking about you,” in the way that he has of catching you off guard, beginning a sincerely deep thought with what seems like shoving a large stone somewhere deep in your neck between your throat and your spine where confusion is high and oxygen is at a premium. He will tout that the Bible says,

“There is no God,” and pose the perplexity of believing the Bible to be true in what it says with this quote taken directly from Scripture. He will often quote C.S. Lewis, “Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value.” But with Adam, you have to wait for the context of it all. Lewis continues his thoughts of friendship and its value: “Rather it is one of those things that gives value to survival.” In the 14th Psalm, the composer writes, “The fool in his heart says, ‘There is no God.’” Adam will turn that rock in my throat into sustenance with the relief and release you feel after holding your breath under water, diving down for the rings at the bottom of the pool, pushing yourself until your lungs burn and the back of your eyes begin to tingle. “John, I honestly hate thinking about you,” and he will pause for the effect, “because it makes me think of all the time we’ve missed. There’s a waste in worrying about the past and alternate realities. Our times now, our times together, are so good, you know? And in Heaven? It’ll be all about the now. There’s no time with God, John. That’s what makes it so sweet.”

And this will blow me away, lead me in understanding, and make me feel that same weakness. All over again.

..

After his visit, I wrote a letter to my friend with whom I played as a child, the first person my age I met in my new

hometown in New Mexico. With whom I first joked about sex, “fought” over a girl only to end up not caring that much about her and even more about each other, rode alongside as our fathers drove us 7 hours to go see a baseball game—two years in a row, quoted the entirety of Disney’s *Aladdin*, borrowed shin guards and squeezed into old soccer cleats just so that I could spend a week alongside him at soccer camp, and many other of my great childhood memories. It must have been mostly about thanking him for his visit and telling him about life at school or how church youth group was going, but what stings at me now is that I closed the letter with “Phileo” and “brotherly love” in parentheses. I wanted to relive that adult moment of shared feelings, but I was again brought down by self doubt. So strange, since he had been the first to say the words. Part of me was trying to show off what I knew about Greek and the Bible, but it was a convenient way to “man-up” the sentiment and avoid essentially writing a “love letter” to a boy because, face it, no matter the content, the salutation and complementary closing say it all. And just another “goodbye,” “later,” or “write soon” will never do for a friend who is a lifetime.

..

Soon we will both be 30, and he will be expecting his third child—another girl. Not being able to control or foresee the sex of our children, I have tried on many visits to talk his

baby girls into agreeing to an arranged marriage with my first-born son. It is a bit of a gag, but in reality, I want to be a part of his family. Perhaps I already am, but he has his own family, you see. We both do.

Loves grow and change. Intimacy finds new partners. Adam and I live half-a-day's drive away, and this wouldn't be terrible if we were only 20 and had the same obligations we had back then. But wives and daughters and packing all the necessities to tote one or more children 12 or more hours in a car along with all the affects for making that long of a trip worthwhile? Back then, a phone call would be enough to get me out of my apartment and onto the highway. No, now a phone call is missed in the middle of a night class, and I have obligations the next day that keep me from returning the message.

There's heartbreak to it because simple phone calls to see how the day went are few and far between. We do our best to coordinate times to get together as part of other trips that we are taking, but our schedules don't always overlap. One time in high school, I was away at my grandparents' house when his family was on a trip to the Grand Canyon and stayed at my house in Arizona. That was not easy on me. Our families have missed seeing each other on trips through New Mexico and Utah during summer or Christmas trips to visit in-laws. I

say, “Oh, that’s alright. We’ll do it next time,” but that doesn’t heal the sadness of another missed moment to share.

The last time we were together, we were at his home in New Mexico with his wife and two daughters. My expectant wife and I were moving to Texas, and we stopped in Los Alamos along the way. His life was beautiful. His wife and children, their energy, the atmosphere of home all impressed upon me how sweet the now really is. Basking in this helped me grow up a little more, pulling me closer into the world of fatherhood. How young and immature I always am.

As you get older, priorities shift. The old gives way to the new, and I have to accept that I just can’t be his everyday friend anymore, for I have another. So does he. A new kind of love, eros, takes over. It has to. It’s not a weight of obligation but rather a more fulfilling love than I’ve ever had. A romantic love is compelling, completing, and makes certain demands of your person and your life. Subsequently, a resulting child forces a man to confront agape love as closely as humanly possible. I do less and less for me. And as it should, the old can no longer come first—that would be a true shame.