

THE GIFT OF FALLING IN LOVE

"How do you like falling in?" said the prince...

"Is that what you call falling in?"

"Yes," answered the prince, "I should think it a very tolerable specimen."

"It seemed to me like going up," rejoined she.

"My feeling was certainly one of elevation too," the prince conceded.

The prince in George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* has experienced the secret of falling in love: one *falls in* – but one also *"rises up"*.

Falling in love gets a bad rap in some circles. "One shouldn't follow something as fleeting as emotions," goes the wisdom; better to use cool reason – much safer that way. But I'd like to write in defense of falling in love, which I believe is a great gift, and the month of St. Valentine seems like a good time to do it. Sure, there are counterfeits of genuine love; sure, we can be deceived by our emotions. But there are counterfeits of knowledge – error, inaccuracy, deception – and no one ever thinks of discarding the mind. There are counterfeits when it comes to freedom – libertinism, arbitrariness, selfishness – but no one suggests that we should get rid of free will. Why, when it comes to the heart, is it so tempting to throw out the baby with the bathwater?

But maybe we should even keep the proverbial bathwater, if in a modified form. Falling in love is like falling into something much bigger than ourselves; to clean up the metaphor a bit, it's like falling into a vast mountain lake, deep and clear, though we can't see all of its depths from the shore. We are invited to be *overwhelmed* by love – and how else should it be, since love is the greatest reality not only of human existence, but of divine, and of supernatural existence as well? With love are unlocked all the possibilities of our own being, and of the other's, and vast new ones are created. So in another sense, when we fall in love, we also fall into the depth of our own being, and into the depth of the one who inspires the love. Love opens us up, stirring everything to a new life, calling out of us our profoundest, truest self; and it ushers us into the wonderful mystery of another person's intimate self.

That's looking at what we fall into. What about the "falling" part? Why that image? Is it an accident, as it is whenever one falls? Falling in love does have something in common with falling physically: in both cases it's not something we "do", it "happens" to us. But that's where the similarity ends; because falling in love isn't an accident – far from it. It comes to us as a *gift*. Suddenly, without any warning, the other person, in their beauty, in their uniqueness, *touches* us in the center of our being – and love wells up in us. As everyone knows, this could never be manufactured; we can't make it happen. Does this mean that falling in love comes from the beloved, if not from ourselves? Though the beauty of the other is in one sense the reason for the love, if we think about it, even the other person can't cause love in us; it's not as if they "do" something to make it happen. It just does. But the love must come from somewhere – and so it seems that there is someone else involved: capital "s" Someone, who effects the opening of our heart, and unveils the "secret" of the other for us. I would suggest that it is God who opens us, and reveals the beloved in this

magical way, offering him to us as a gift. This hints at something else: God, who is the ultimate origin of romantic love, is also its ultimate custodian...

But maybe on second thought, falling in love does have something else in common with falling by accident. They're both a bit scary – or very scary. When we fall in love we become *vulnerable*, and the other has power over us. But it's worse than that: falling in love is an invitation to come to belong to the other *completely*, and to surrender ourselves into a *total* dependence on them – and to take responsibility for the other, whose heart is being entrusted to us... And yet, if we know that the secret of happiness is to live for and with others, and if we've fostered a heart ready to give of itself, this fall isn't *bad* scary; it's *good* scary. It's like when we were children, and thrilled at being frightened by ghost stories in the safety of our beds. Or, like when we parachute off an airplane...No, I'm not being morbid, or cynical; this has a happy ending. There is a chance that the parachute won't open – and there is a chance that we will be betrayed in love, to a lesser or a greater degree. What then? Wouldn't it be better to avoid the danger altogether? The answer is simple: we can never go wrong in loving. Remember the Custodian? One way He exercises His watchfulness is by guaranteeing that our love is never for nothing – and more: that it is returned in abundance and bears fruit a hundredfold. I don't say we never *suffer* if we love – only that we always win in loving.

But getting back to “falling in”. Once we're in, is that the end of the story? Quite the contrary: it's only the beginning. We may have fallen into the mountain lake – but then we have to *swim*. And we either swim on – or we swim out. While in the first instance falling in love *happens* to us, and isn't *done* by us, we have to accept or turn down the gift: we have to cooperate with our *freedom*. We may decide not to swim on. If we do, our “yes”, our free going along with the gift, becomes like the nerve-center of being in love, and the experience becomes our own in a new way. We take true ownership of it. Then, and only then, will the love grow and blossom into its fullness. It would take a half dozen articles to say how freedom guarantees that the falling in love doesn't just stay on the level of the heart, but ensouls our every act toward the beloved; to say how it guarantees that when the wonderful experience yields to the pressures of life, love remains; to say how it guarantees that eventually, what was initially given to us as a gift, through our cooperation becomes built up – piece, by piece, by piece, through countless small acts of faithfulness and many deaths to self – into the great edifice of a perfected love.

It's interesting, isn't it, that we use the same word for man's *falling* into sin, and man's *falling* in love. But falling has a different meaning in each instance, and the first is a parody of the second. In both cases, we in some sense give up our freedom. In one, we are taken prisoner by our illegitimate desires – entering, as St. Paul says, into the “slavery of sin”. We are chained down by living for ourselves. In the other experience, we again are taken away from ourselves – but this time, on the wings of love, into something greater than ourselves. We come to belong to the other in love – and attain to a new freedom. By *this* fall, we're raised up.

*“Would you like a fall, princess?” said the prince, looking down.
“Ah! There you are! Yes, if you please, prince,” said the princess, looking up.*

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