



Foreign/Second Language: What is Love?

What if a foreign language lesson could expand our understanding of love?

David gave his second-year German college students the following song lyrics to read in German (this is an English translation of the lyrics to “Wenn du schläfst” by the German band Söhne Mannheims, from the CD Noiz (2004); the German version can be found at <http://www.lyricsbox.com/sohne-mannheims-lyrics-wenn-du-schlafst-9tr8xr7.html>. The song can be purchased through services such as iTunes):

I just want to be close to you,
in the night when you sleep.
I just want to be close to you,
I'm awake when you sleep.

Nothing needs as much protection as you,
in the darkness of the world.

“After listening to a clip of the song, I asked the students to read the lyrics and write a paragraph or draw a storyboard with some descriptive sentences, describing the opening scenes and basic plot of a possible video to accompany the song. The students were told the video should make clear who they think ‘you’ and ‘I’ might be.

“The most common student suggestions involved images of romantic love, scenarios involving a parent watching over a sleeping child, and sometimes more sinister stories of obsessive stalking. Many homemade fan videos for the song posted on sites such as YouTube fall into the romantic category, sometimes amounting to collections of beautiful women that the maker of the video would like to be close to. I showed clips from these (after checking for suitability).

“After discussing the student examples, I showed the video made by the band (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4PxmrRY6ig>) It takes a different direction, showing images of children, the aged, refugees, the homeless, and people in various degrees of wealth and poverty, and belonging to different religious and ethnic groups. We discussed

who 'you' is in the video and together listed what made this different from most pop videos. I asked what kinds of love are presented in the students' version of the video and in the actual video. Most of the people in the video are not obvious objects of romantic attraction. I asked, What kind of love would someone need to have in order for someone else to want to protect them and be close to them?

"We went on to discuss the remainder of the song lyrics:

And I'd like to be protection for you!
In the night and in the day.
For an eternal light protects me!
And it said to me:
No one brings light into the day,
that is so dark
and yet you have dared to live
because it's right!
Yet nothing needs as much protection as you,
please believe me!
And I plead for angels to come,
an army that watches only over you.

"I asked students to consider a series of questions relating to the second half of the song:

- What new ideas are introduced?
- What do you think is the singer's basis for choosing to love the people in the video?
- Should people have to earn love by being gifted or attractive?
- What would someone have to believe about the world and other people to think that they should want to be close to and protect refugees, child soldiers, immigrants, or homeless people?
- What practical responses could we make after watching this video?"

What's going on here?

David saw his German lesson as a way of challenging his students to examine their assumptions about love and see it anew, by connecting it with the excluded and oppressed, and seeing it in terms of grace instead of attraction. He also saw his lesson as a place for raising big questions and exploring ways we might need to change.

He engaged students in reflecting on their own frameworks for thinking about love (writing their own script before viewing), and challenged them to ask big questions and consider how they might need to change.

He reshaped his practice by first drawing on students' own experience, by structuring his lesson so that students' assumptions were revealed and then challenged, and by choosing resources (the videos) that opened up big questions.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Without rejecting romantic or family love (both of which appear in other videos by this band), this song and video point to ways in which a Christian view of love stretches further. The video calls for a compassion that seeks the wellbeing of others ahead of one's own comfort or gratification. The lyrics also suggest a connection between being loved by God and committing to loving others beyond the boundaries of similarity and attraction, and so opens questions about the relationship of faith to love. It also indirectly asks us to consider what might bring hope in dark situations and what role we might play in that.

What difference does it make?

A large number of popular songs deal with erotic love. Asking students to script a video for the song triggered expectations in their minds connected with this genre. Becoming aware of one's existing assumptions is an important step toward learning to see anything new. Having students explore their own images and then watch the video invites them into this process of seeing new, and the visual impact of the video, with its focus on real people, encourages a compassionate response.

Where could we go from here?


Students could work further with this video (e.g., by choosing a group of people in the video and writing a description of them in German, including the usual description of appearances, but also including their possible hopes and fears). The class could take this a step further by finding a concrete way to learn about and serve people like those they described. Students could also research further online about the band and about their other videos (e.g., another recent video by this band, for the song *Kraft unseres Amtes*, focuses on street poverty in Berlin).

Digging deeper

The band's video asks us to expand our view of love by replacing the expected romantic images with images that call for a commitment to protecting the weak and the oppressed. Throughout the Bible God is seen as on the side of the poor and the oppressed, because they are ones with little power in society. The Bible sums up those needing special protection and love as "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger" (Jeremiah 22:3).

Love, in biblical terms, is different from the way love is perceived in modern Western culture. In our society, romantic love dominates, and we see love largely as an emotion, somewhat temporary; it comes and goes, and we fall in and out of love. Romantic love is viewed as overpowering, and often people are described as in its grip with little responsibility for their behavior. Hence the saying, "All's fair in love and war". Love as commitment is also part of our society, but this is often perceived as having weakened in modern culture.

Love in the Bible is a strong attachment to God and others, and also a commitment to a way of behaving and thinking about others that does not depend on feelings alone. One of the words used for love in the Old Testament covers a range of meanings: love, faithfulness, mercy, loyalty, compassion, grace, favor, kindness—to name just a few. The New Testament follows suit with a range of words for different aspects of love. Love in the Bible is a virtue with enormous depth, and Paul unpacks some of this in 1 Corinthians 13 (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). God's character is defined as love (1 John 4:8), sending Jesus out of love for the world (John 3:16). Jesus emphasized love of God and neighbor as the two great commandments (Matthew 22:36-39).



Joy is love exalted; peace is love in repose; long-suffering is love enduring; gentleness is love in society; goodness is love in action; faith is love on the battlefield; meekness is love in school; and temperance is love in training. D. L. Moody



Previous: Failure and Community
What if failures were seen as oppo...

Next: Grammar and Giving
What if a grammar lesson challeng...

