

Saint Valentin's Day and the Heart

Susanna Sciomer, Federica Moscucci

Department of Clinical, Internal, Anesthesiologic and Cardiovascular Sciences, University of Rome "Sapienza", Rome, Italy

To the Editor,

The heart, a hollow muscular organ, center and motor of the circulatory system, has been perceived in many cultural contexts and in different epochs as a supporting element of man's emotional and spiritual life. A clear example is the sentence of Christ in the Matthew's Gospel where we read "Ex abundantia enim cordis os loquitur", "the mouth speaks for the abundance of the heart" (1), which has preserved, with the obvious differences of phonemes, its ancient and deep meaning also in the French, German, English language.

There are obviously some notable exceptions, such as the biblical expression "bringing the baby in the womb for nine months", in the vulgate of Saint Jerome the term "womb" was translated with "uterus", while in the version of Martin Luther "im Herzen" (in the heart), in fact.

Always, according to what J.G. Herder claimed, according to which "schon als Tier der Mensch Sprache", "Even as an animal, humans have language", so when man has acquired the ability to express himself verbally (2). In all Indo-European languages there is in fact a huge variety of expressions where the affectiveness covered by heart is absolutely protagonist. Among these, we remember: "heart of stone", "tender heart", "generous heart", and so on.

The various languages have been enriched with numerous expressions and idioms that indicate the heart as the place of intimacy and feelings: "a kind-hearted soul", "to open one's heart to somebody", "having not the heart to tell something", "in one's heart of hearts", "heartfelt thanks", and so on.

However, the passion and irrationality that often accompany the emotional sphere have also given rise to the use of certain expressions with sometimes controversial connotations. A. Manzoni in "I Promessi Sposi" (The Betrothed) states, in fact: "Of course, the heart, who cares, always has something to say about what will be. But what knows the heart? Just a little bit of what has already happened." (3).

Therefore, the heart has, over time, become the seat of intentions, of desires, of the will and determination of man and his courage (to be brave-hearted). Not the brain, but the heart is considered the place of rational and irrational feelings.

Innumerable figurative meanings that date back to the origins of our civilization can be read in the Iliad, where, just in the first Book, the word "heart" appears 17 times. In ancient Egypt, the psychostasia was used to judge the weight of heart compared to a feather, in order to send the dead to his own afterlife life or not. The Christian Gospels repeatedly invests the heart of profound dedication in Christian love: in eighth beatitude, for example, proclaims "Blessed are the pure of heart because they will see God" (4).

Therefore, even the most ancient civilizations and cultures have never hesitated to locate in the heart the place of the soul and of human feelings.

Why? Perhaps because, as K.J. Trübner believed in his "Deutsches Wörterbuch" in 1939, primitive man associated the presence of life with the heartbeat in an automatic and mechanical way (5).

Alternatively, perhaps because, as B. Pascal would say "the heart has its reason, which Reason does not know". Or, finally, because, as the American psychologist P. Pearsall believes in "The code of the heart", 1999,

⁶ it is the heart, not the brain, the organ that preserves the vital energy, the pure essence of our being, the soul, and distributes harmoniously life to the billions of cells of our organism, while the brain remains engaged in its “evolutionary imperative”.

Certainly this last aspect takes us away from the perception of the common feeling about heart, showing how ancient and simple is this perception. Therefore, we are not surprised to observe the richness of the religious iconography of the Baroque period in the catholic countries, where we find with a heart-shaped ex-voto, present in sanctuaries, churches, altars, even in the houses.

An inexplicable religious-Christian and pan-naturalistic interweaving characterizes the popular San Valentine's Day. In the Roman martyrology, two martyrs are remembered today: a Roman priest decapitated at the time of Emperor Claudio II, on the Via Flaminia in Rome, in 270 and the Bishop of Terni, consecrated by San Feliciano of Foligno and also beheaded in Rome a few years later. Two homonymous martyrs who gave life to the cult of St. Valentine that has very ancient traditions. This is proved by the existence of the remains in the Basilica of the cemetery of the Valentine's catacombs on the heights of the so-called Monti Parioli, near the Via Flaminia. History teaches us that often Sacred and Profane are intertwined without too much mystery. In fact, in the Middle Ages, to the cult of the two martyrs, it was joined both in France and in England, the cult of St. Valentine, protector of lovers, based on the popular belief that February 14 birds would begin to mate.

The journey of St. Valentine's Day has been long and uneven since then. It has reached the story of Valentino and Valentina, the eternal lovers, “les amoureux”, by Raymond Peynet; the engaged couples known all over the world. They were born in the days of the Nazi occupation of France, immediately after Raymond's escape from a concentration camp. He saw in the station of Valence so many sad and gloomy people, so “I walked away and I headed for a park. I saw a kiosk, then a thin and young long-haired violinist who played a romantic melody. His eyes were fixed on the violinist, and for me it was a “coup de coeur” (of course, we would say!) I pulled out a pencil and a notebook and started drawing”. The first lovers of Peynet were

born. Meanwhile in the kiosk of Valence has become a national monument, surmounted by the statues of Valentino and Valentina. Peynet is known all over the world; in Japan and Florida a wine was produced in his name called “Les Amoureux”.

At his death, however, a few lines were spent to celebrate him. Undoubtedly, his characteristic pencil and his ironic and witty ability to transfer the feeling to the observer have survived.

A number of clinical and experimental studies indicate that strong emotions, especially negative emotions, such as hostility, anger, depression and anxiety, precipitate coronary heart disease (7, 8). On the one hand, coronary heart disease patients have difficulty in coping with stress and depression and experience negative emotions, like anger, frustration or loneliness. (9) On the contrary, positive emotions, especially hope, contribute to health benefits and lead to lower levels of coronary heart disease and other diseases. (10) Thus, good feeling and positive emotions could be considered preventive cardiovascular conditions.

The heart, the home of irrationality and desire, of affection, of the intimacy of passion, of love, must therefore be worthily celebrated and preserved.

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Correspondence:

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Federica Moscucci, MD, PhD,

Dpt of Clinical, Internal, Anesthesiological and Cardiovascular Sciences; University of Rome "Sapienza", Viale del Policlinico, n.155, 00186, Rome, Italy

Phone: +39 06 49970118

E-mail: ederica.moscucci@uniroma1.it