

# Three Little Words: An Evolution

James Noyes  
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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
-- John 1:1

Ours was not a family of “I love you”s. Growing up, never once did I hear this most basic of human expressions. What was not expressed in spoken words, however, was always strongly felt in deeds (and exhibited at the end of letters or birthday cards with a simple, “Love, —”). So, while ours was a loving family, we never said anything about it. This didn’t seem unusual, and besides, if I felt it, was there any reason to hear it? Something deep from within told me so.

My initial attempt at saying those “three little words” came toward the end of my junior year in high school. Michelle was the first girl I actually went to movies with and took out to dinner. We spent a lot of time together and I cared deeply about her, so much so that I broke the barrier and told her how I felt; but, she did not say it back. Later, I risked it once more, and again there was no reply (ironically, only when we broke up months later, did she finally reciprocate). While this first try appeared to be a dismal failure, the success was that I spoke those words at all, despite it having been a painful offering.

Following my senior year, it was time to move away to college. Leading up to this event was my sister Nancy’s wedding. With a marathon of preparations, a long list of visiting relatives, and my own participation in the music of both the ceremony and reception, there were too many distractions to consider the implications of leaving for Minneapolis. But just a couple of days later the car was packed and it was time to go. Dad, busy with work, would not make the trip; so, it was “goodbye” right there in the driveway. Suddenly, a rush of eighteen years of silence burst forth with the tightest hug I have ever given, “I love you, Dad!” As tears streamed down my cheeks I pressed my face into his chest and heard him gently say, “I love you, Jim.” A day later, when my mom dropped me off for marching band orientation, the same flood of emotion returned and I blubbered the first time to her, “I love you, Mom!” “I love you, too, Jim!” she sobbed as she drove away. My family *did* know how to say it!

The following summer found me back in Iowa, yet trips to Minneapolis and Washington, D.C. yielded the first “I love you”s from my girlfriend Kris and my sister Marge respectively. Shortly after, these words were exchanged between Nancy and me. Two years later, at age 21, I worked for a summer at EPCOT Center in Disney World. Here, in the All-American College Orchestra, I encountered many self-centered individuals, who cared little for the feelings of others. It was in this atmosphere that I reached out in a single phone call to a new category of relationship telling Tim and Kristen, two life-long friends, “I love you.”

A week after graduation from the University of Minnesota, the school’s Symphonic Wind Ensemble embarked on a tour of Scandinavia and Russia. It was a watershed event. For many of us, this was a thrilling first trip to foreign lands. For all of us, the shared camaraderie of joys and disappointments created a lasting impression. Never before had I felt so close to such a large group of people! On our last evening together, having returned to Helsinki from three days in Leningrad, we celebrated our farewell with dinner and dancing. Some of us proposed toasts. I rose and spoke a few words about the man who had facilitated this entire wonderful and meaningful experience, Dr.

Frank Bencriscutto. In closing, I made a heart-felt revelation in front of the entire ensemble and support staff, some seventy-five people, “I love you, Dr. Ben.”

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Folk singer/songwriter Greg Brown provides insight into the words of John when he sings, “Don’t have to make love, ‘cause love made me.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the beginning—my own beginning—was love. Love was with me, and I was love. Insight into this self-referential paradigm is revealed through Edgar Allen Poe’s *House of Usher*, an appellation which “seemed to include...both the family and the family mansion.”<sup>2</sup> Here, we learn how our selves and our surroundings are one in the same: with the demise of the last surviving members of the family Usher, the mansion crumbles. My own experience reveals a happier result: the intensely loving environment of my family and home produced within me the Word with which to express it!

The First Letter of John goes further, stating that, indeed: “God is Love.”<sup>3</sup> Inspired by these words, Motown artist Marvin Gaye reminds us of the simplicity of the Christian directive when he sings: “All He asks of us, is we give each other love.”<sup>4</sup> The focus here is on Gaye’s use of the word *ask*, for while this statement paraphrases the commandments handed down by Jesus (to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself), does anyone really believe we can be *commanded* to either love or else? The more love is forced, the tighter we grip, the further it slips away. No, instead, love is not made to happen, it just is, and will grow if *allowed* to do so.

Philosopher Erich Fromm tells us if we are unable to love strangers equally as those closest to us, we don’t know how to love at all.<sup>5</sup> On the surface, this may appear a bleak outlook. However, to become good at anything takes practice. This holds true for music, medicine, carpentry—and for love.<sup>6</sup> My introduction to this “Art of Loving” began at home, with my family. My practice has grown to include *myself*, many close friends, and has begun to reach further to students and acquaintances. It continues to grow (although, I must admit, only during those times in which I allow it do so). It is helpful to remember that if we are made by love and surrounded by love, then we *are* love, one and the same. Now, consider the following line of thought: if we are love, and God is love, then what does that make us? We are *atonement*—“at one” with God. Perhaps we should not be afraid of saying those “three little words” either!

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Brown, “Just By Myself,” from *Dream Café*, Red House Records, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, “Fall of the House of Usher,” *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, September, 1839.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John, 4:7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Marvin Gaye, “God is Love,” from *What’s Going On*, Motown Records, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1956.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 5.