

Show that you're evolved with a thoughtful gift



SERENDIPITY'S WAND

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In Tom Robbins' most recent novel "Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates" the protagonist's grandmother, known as Maestra, makes an elitist, yet valid point regarding humanity. It's her "missing link" theory. Unlike Darwin, who never solved the problem of the missing evolutionary link between man and ape, Maestra sees the answer quite clearly.

To her, six things separate us from our simian counterparts:

Imagination, aesthetics, humor, rebelliousness, eroticism and spirituality.

Because this is a Valentine's Day column, I thought I'd take the opportunity to express how pathetic I think the holiday is. It represents the opposite of all of Maestra's traits and in doing so sets up un-analytical people for disappointment.

"Now," she says in the book, "since those are the features that define a human being, it follows that the extent to which someone is lacking in those qualities is the extent to which he or she is less than human."

Valentine's Day is supposed to represent love, that most human of emotions, yet everything the marketing of the holiday stands for is lacking Maestra's features.

First, look at some of the things people spend money on for this forced day of expression: boxed chocolate, bunched roses and stuffed animals. The names moan unoriginality. Boxed, bunched, stuffed? Forget it! You want your gift to sing (but not like that freaky round headed "Tickle and Wiggle Happy Face" or that deranged banana toting "Tickle Wiggle Shaking Gorilla.")

Use some imagination, please. If you don't have the social consciousness to boycott such crass material objects — avoid them because giving them is like saying to a partner "you are about as interesting as a mass-marketed toy designed to appeal to a large, shallow audience."

Anyone should know a gesture so lacking in imagination is a few inches short of a touchdown (as was that sentence — see what happens when we settle for clichés?)

Just saying no to chocolate hearts and cheesy lingerie sets you up nicely to choose something satisfying Maestra's aesthetics requirement — that is, beauty for beauty's sake. Why not give him some sand and promise a trip to the coast? Or give her a vase you made in high school ceramics with some high quality pens inside?

We know Valentine's Day promises sex for many couples. Companies try to make money off that too, though they have lots of practice in sex-appeal, they can't sell eroticism. I'll leave that to you. I don't even want to think about you all doing things like that. Eew.

Another of Maestra's ideas the advertisers capitalize on is humor.

To me, getting a card, funny or not, that someone else wrote makes me wonder why I don't date a card maker. The old adage "it's the thought that counts" is true, but most people don't interpret it correctly. It's not that any thought counts. Plucking some card off the shelf at the bookstore doesn't count as a thought unless you want your Valentine to send the thank you note to Hallmark.

What counts is if you try to suit something to your Valentine. This is where rebelliousness fails to come into the invasive picture supermarkets and department stores make.

If you don't avoid buying

"appropriate" gifts you are simply conforming to an absurd idea of love and its expression.

Yes, someone else told us to express our love on this day. That's bad enough. But it doesn't mean we have to buy the stuff they want us to express it with. It's really a big trap because all of the things you are supposed to buy don't convey love. They show a marketable, silver-plated love substitute that has nothing to do with you and everything to do with money other people will get. Nothing is less spiritual than the bulk of mindless consumerism. If God were one of us, she'd make her own Valentine's day cards.

One thing that makes Maestra's grandson Switters so charming (though he's missing teeth and has a propensity to seduce adolescents and nuns) is his willingness, as Robbins puts it "to take risks in order to experiment with a different set of circumstances."

So do that. This Valentine's Day, re-work your circumstances. If need be, walk fast past displays and cover your eyes with your hands. Resist all urges to contribute to the misdirected mess Valentine's Day has come to represent.

Do something you have never done before. Otherwise you'll be just another ape, leaving your partner in emotional debt on a day that could be a meaningful affirmation.



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