

Fear sometimes is Love's Defining Moment

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Valentine's Day can be defined with a word of one syllable: LOVE! But defining the emotion of love is considerably more difficult. I personally have always thought that love is marrying someone even after they've dropped a snake on you. It happened to me. I was 15 and madly in puppy love with Ray, who — lacking etchings — was proudly showing me the new silo his parents had built on their farm west of town.

As we stood inside the empty silo, I noticed a bird nest sitting on the rung of a built-in ladder leading up to the rounded top. "Hey," I said to Ray, "why don't you climb up and see if there are any baby birds in the nest?"

Ray scaled the ladder, reached over his head into the nest and pulled out a yard-long blacksnake. I learned two important lessons that day. First, Ray will hold a snake about as long as Minnie Pearl's brother will hold a hot horseshoe. Second, when someone drops a snake on you in a silo, there's no place to run except in tight circles.

I know that many women make it a policy not to marry any man who drops a snake on them. But I obviously will, so that is love to me.

Love to my friend Darlene is not killing her husband when she found out that he had squirreled away several hundred dollars of "hideout" money. Don't ask me how she discovered his stash — I promised not to tell — however I have a strong suspicion that love to her husband is staying married to someone who sneaks a peek inside his billfold.

Love to Mom was not getting a divorce or hiring a hitman when Dad accepted a Cessna 140 in payment of a legal fee. The family had lots of uses for the money and no use at all — according to Mom — for an airplane. In all the years Dad owned that plane, Mom, deathly afraid to fly, never got within 50 feet of it. "I'll fly with you when I can keep one foot on the ground!" she promised Dad. And she was as good as her word. But my sisters and I frequently flew with Dad because Mom decided that — while the plane would certainly crash if she were a passenger — it wouldn't crash with her husband and kids in it.

I've always believed that to my Grandma Maude, love was crossing the Cimarron River astride a horse after a flood washed out the bridge. She and Grandpa Jake forded the river on horses in the morning, then she led back his mount — needed for farm work during the day — while Grandpa walked the remaining mile to town where he taught school and moonlighted as a barber. The fording process was repeated in reverse at night, often in the dark. Grandma crossed the river on horseback four times a day for many months. Now that may not seem like love to you, but consider this: Grandma Maude — as fearful of water as Mom was of airplanes — never learned to swim.

I have always thought that the grandest evidence of love was expressed by King Edward VIII when he gave up his kingdom to marry the woman he loved. That is simply a gesture so romantic that it cannot be topped. But my friend Barb was the recipient of the most romantic gesture I've heard of recently. While she and her husband of less than a

year were dating, he asked if she liked roses and Barb explained that she liked carnations better because they lasted longer. When he invited her to dinner at his home a few evenings later, almost every room contained huge vases of carnations! I'm pretty sure Barb couldn't have felt more cherished if Dave had abdicated a throne for her.

Still, it's been my experience that while men will show love, most are not interested in talking about or analyzing it — so it is a wise woman who can recognize love when she sees it. The best example I have of Ray's love is that he spent eight hours one August day traipsing over the Custer Battleground with me while I searched for markers of various cavalymen who died there. It was hot and dusty and I suffered one of the worst sunburns of my life, but — although signs warned visitors to watch out for them — Ray didn't encounter a single snake. As far as I'm concerned, I still owe him one!

Happy Valentine's Day!