



# P E R S P E C T I V E S



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## Happy Relationships Day!

### *A Time to Reflect on Our Precious Connections*

Ah yes... Valentine's Day is here. Commercially, it's a very successful day because merchants have historically used this "hearts and flowers" day to sell lots of sugary red hearts and flowers. And, having grown up as a Catholic, I've always experienced a certain sadness from learning how St. Valentine was beheaded for sending a note to a young Roman maiden signed "Your Valentine"—a practice widely in use globally to this day.

Unfortunately, the real St. Valentine was at least two different historical characters. One a Catholic priest, and the other the Bishop of Terni. Both were purportedly beheaded by Claudius II around 270 A.D., commemorating the death and burial of St. Valentine on February 14th. One of the many problems with this theory is that the Catholic Church actually canonized (i.e., made a saint) at least three different Roman era Valentines. To further cloud the picture, we cannot be sure if the young Roman maiden was the jailer's daughter, the daughter of a wealthy Roman who Valentine cured, or if the whole thing was merely made up to obscure that Valentine's Day was probably created to "Christianize" the ancient Roman festival of Lupercalia.

Now, Lupercalia was a really interesting Roman holiday that dates back to the 6th century BC, and is attached to Rome's two founding twins, Romulus and Remus. Without going into great detail, Lupercalia emerges from the name Lupercal which was the name of the she-wolf cave where the twins were raised by the she-wolf that is believed to be located at the base of Palatine Hill. How the boys ended up there is a great story with a Moses-like beginning, a basket left in the reeds, etc., and ends with the founding of Rome itself from that single cave.

In addition to that noble lineage dating to the very beginnings of Rome, Lupercalia also trades off the name of Lupercus, the ancient Roman goddess of fertility. Due to the Romans' attentiveness to all things relating to sexuality, nakedness, promiscuity and fertility, it is no wonder that the church under Pope Gelasius declared in the 5th Century that the former Lupercalia (always celebrated in mid-February) would henceforth be known as St. Valentine's Day and celebrated on the 14th. So, that's how we got here. What conceivable significance does any of this have for us today?

Viewed from its full historical framework, Valentine's Day is

about so much more than red doily heart-shaped notes, more than flowers, and more even than sharing "I love you." It's about relationships.

Valentine's Day is built on an altar of relationships: the relationship of Romulus and Remus that lead to the founding of Rome; the relationship of the Luperci priesthood in Rome who slapped young maidens with red blood from a sacrificed goat to increase their fertility and mark them as "available" to young bachelors (yes, that's where the red comes from); the relationship of Cupid as a Greek symbol of Eros; the relationship of all three of the St. Valentines to their jailers and whatever young maiden belonged in their story; the relationship of Roman emperors and Christian popes; the pagan festival of Lupercalia to the February 14th day we currently celebrate; the relationship of the first recorded "Valentine" sent in 1415 by the Duke of Orleans to his wife from the Tower of London; and, even more importantly, the relationships all of us enjoy in the 21st Century. Those who share our feelings of love and affection for the various "Valentines" in our lives understand the nature of relationships full well.

Since Valentine's Day is fundamentally an ancient story retold through time as a series of intricate relationships, we really must ask ourselves how this relationship orientation can serve our evolving species as we celebrate Valentine's Day. So, let's look beyond the relationship of one grammar school child to the other kids in class that send and receive red colored paper notes and heart-shaped sugar drops with one-word messages. Let's look at all the relationships we would be wise to honor as adults.

We are all suddenly aware of the relationship we each have to the "essential workers" who have kept our medical facilities running, our groceries bagged, our clothes dry cleaned, our houses protected, our online packages delivered and our mail uninterrupted during this horrific pandemic. For the very first time, many of us have begun to see our relationship to those usually faceless workers as worthy of praise and appreciation. If we extend that circle of appreciation many more relationships emerge. We see the relationship of our children to their schoolteachers in an entirely new light, we see the relationship we all enjoy with the "butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker" in a new

light, we see the relationship we all have to our electronic communications, and we see the relationship we have to each other as citizens of a great republic that is fighting for its survival a mere 245 years after it was birthed.

By contrast, Valentine's Day has evolved over the last 2600 years revealing one series of entwinements after another. Viewed from this historical context, we gain a new appreciation for all the multitudinous relationships which have built upon one another, co-creating the romantic holiday we celebrate today, and showing us that it is so much more than romantic. On this "relationship" holiday, we can celebrate connection in all its wonderful expressions.

Let's celebrate all those relationships we tend to take for granted every other day of the year. Let's continue to celebrate all those that arise in civil society every day and vow to keep them in our consciousness even when the sun sets on February 14th. Even better, let's celebrate on February 14th that we humans have the unique ability to create, cherish, and encompass myriad forms of relationships and make this a day we celebrate having relationships at all.

Our human relationships are clearly one of the most defining aspects of human civilization. It could be said relationships define who we are as a species. How about we start celebrating Relationship Day every February 14th by reminding ourselves and each other just how precious our relationships are—even when we sometimes forget to experience them.

In the words of the immortal poet John Donne: "No man is an island, alone and to himself complete..." Thank goodness we are all in this together, able to celebrate Relationship Day.