



THE RAVEN FOUNDATION

Beyond Power Struggles: Teaching Without Rivalry

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Introduction

At the heart of mimetic theory's analysis of rivalry is the concept of the stumbling block. This block is not a physical object that one might trip over, but a dynamic of human relationships which causes them to sour and fracture into conflict. In my presentation today, I will attempt to analyze a particularly insidious form of this phenomenon, the power struggle between young children and adults. It is the problem that is the subject of one of Jesus' most vehement rants and appears in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18 (NRSV).

I invite you to listen carefully to this familiar passage:

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

² He called a child whom he put among them, ³and said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

⁶ "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!

To the disciples' question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven, a question about rivalry born from within rivalry, Jesus' answer takes physical form. This passage has often been given a liberation theology reading, positing that the child is symbolic of relative powerlessness and poverty in the culture of first century Palestine, and so by extension, in our century as well. While this rightly positions God on the side of the weak and marginalized, it is an over-against reading, in which two sides are needed, even by God, to know which is the right one. I want to explore the more fundamental reading offered by mimetic theory, that Jesus' response to a rivalrous question is a warning about rivalry itself. In this reading the child is not a metaphor at all, but an object lesson.

Though Jesus is concerned about all occasions for stumbling, he seems particularly worked up about the stumbling of children. This is because, I believe, a child who stumbles is falling out of patterns of desire which make faith in God possible. It is therefore vital that the church take seriously its responsibility to educate young children in the way of faith and to do our best to ensure that our church school programs do not become occasions for stumbling.

In order to make this a practical and hopefully useful discussion of that goal, I will be guided by the pioneering work of the Italian educator, Dr. Maria Montessori. Her method is, I believe, a practical application of mimetic theory to early childhood education. While my focus will be on the preschool and kindergarten age groups for which I received my Montessori training, I hope you will see how easily what I will present can be adapted to older children and to adults as well.

For those of you who are not familiar with the Montessori Method, let me offer this brief overview. It is characterized by a structured classroom with carefully prepared teaching materials that are designed to allow for the liberty of the child with limited interference by the teacher. The guiding principle for teachers is to “follow the child”, which means that children are not treated as a generic group, but as individuals with their own needs and curiosities. Respect for each individual is a central theme guiding all classroom interactions. In the Montessori religious classroom, the stories of the bible are presented as concrete materials and displayed on shelves for the children to access as they desire. I have with me a copy of some of the Godly Play curriculumⁱ, if you are interested in learning more about that later. You will be able to glean more about the Montessori Method during my talk, but this should suffice to get us started.

Overview of Mimetic Rivalry

Also by way of getting started, I would like to offer a quick overview of what mimetic theory says about rivalry. My hope is that you are already familiar with this, but if my hope is a vain one, I hope you will feel free to ask questions about it during the question and response time. Mimetic rivalry is a consequence of mimetic desire, which is Girard’s triangular formulation of a subject’s relationship to an object. Desire for an object does not spring autonomously from within an individual nor does an object possess inherent worth or value. An object is desirable only as another desires it. Human beings are drawn towards objects that are imbued with the being of others who we have taken as our models. By possessing the object, we are seeking to possess the being of the model for ourselves.

In his book, *Genesis of Desire*, Jean-Michel Oughourlian helps us to understand the beneficial function of mimetic desire. He likens desire to a psychological movement toward the other which has all the force of a gravitational pull. This draw toward the other enables a self to be received in imitation of the other over time, which is the work of the human child. James Alison, referring to Oughourlian, concludes that “Repetition in time enables the memory to be born, thus making possible language and enabling the human to be kept together as one person throughout his or her life history... that is, it leads to psychogenesis, or the birth of the human psyche.”ⁱⁱⁱ Montessori makes the same observation when she says that the child “absorbs the life going on about him and becomes one with it... his mind ends by resembling the environment itself. Children become like the things they love.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is the beneficial functioning of triangular desire in which love, learning and authentic worship are possible.

But Alison also points out the double valence of this draw.

Of course, like gravity, [desire] is a principle of both attraction and repulsion. At first we are drawn to imitate a model and learn from it, but soon we imitate gestures that lead to rivalry, taking the same object as the model. Our model becomes our rival, and we define ourselves ‘over against’ another. So mimesis is both the condition for our attraction toward others and our separation from them...^{iv}

The same mechanism leads to both the birth of the individual and to rivalry. What triggers the descent into rivalry? René Girard describes it this way in *Violence and the Sacred*:

The mimetic quality of childhood desire is universally recognized. Adult desire is virtually identical, except that (most strikingly in our own culture) the adult is generally ashamed to imitate others for fear of revealing his lack of being. The adult likes to assert his independence and to offer himself as a model to others; he invariably falls back on the formula, “Imitate me!” in order to conceal his own lack of originality.^v

And here in *Evolution and Conversion*:

A mimetic crisis is always a crisis of undifferentiation that erupts when the roles of subject and model are reduced to that of rivals. It’s the disappearance of the object which makes it possible.^{vi}

In a mimetic rivalry, the openly acknowledged difference between the subject and the model is erased, leaving only undifferentiated models who mirror an intensifying desire resulting in the disappearance of the object. As Girard points out, this outcome is more likely in adults because

of the fundamental difference between childhood and adult desire, a difference that leads to stumbling. Whereas children are not ashamed of their need for models, adults are. Adult shame leads to false insistence on the priority of one's own desire and the delusion of originality. This is the sin of pride. In rivalry, the rival's role as model of desire is denied and his role as obstacle is condemned, making a benign or beneficial mediation impossible. Girard calls this a model-obstacle relationship, or along with Matthew, he says that the parties have become stumbling blocks for one another. Which means that desire has become hardened, fixated on a rival to the exclusion of all other potential centers of attention. As the rivalry escalates, the object of desire quite literally recedes from view and the attraction between the rivals radiates with more power than the feeble interest in the object which precipitated the binding of the rivals together.

The Child's Relationship to Objects

Because rivalry both denies the beneficial role of the model and distorts the relationship to objects it interferes with what Dr. Montessori described as the child's "impressive work of inner formation". The object of desire in childhood is nothing less than all of the culture into which the child is born. As mediated by caretaker adults, the culture provides the raw material from which the child will construct a self. Montessori comments that "All that we ourselves are has been made by the child..."^{vii}

Working 60 years before the French publication of Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Montessori did not have the language of mimetic theory to describe this human capacity for imitation. Rather, she called it the absorbent mind and we can observe her sense of wonder at its accomplishments in this passage: "The child is not born with a little knowledge, a little memory, a little will power, which have only to grow as time goes on... we are not dealing with something that develops, but with a fact of formation; something nonexistent has to be produced, starting from nothing."^{viii}

This description of the child's formation is completely in accordance with mimetic theory. Montessori never lost sight of the indirect purpose behind all of the child's direct interaction with their environment. Referring to some of her classroom materials, she said:

Although the exercises are skill oriented in the sense that they involve washing a table or shining one's shoes, their purpose is not to master these tasks for their own sake. It is rather to aid the inner construction of discipline, organization, independence and self-esteem through concentration on a precise and completed cycle of activity.^{ix}

In childhood, appropriation of objects is not a matter of whimsy or even solely about acquiring the being of the model. Mediated but intense engagement with the objects of their environment is an essential element of their unfolding life. The ability to concentrate and to complete cycles of activity are indicative of healthy patterns of desire in children (and adults) where attachment to objects is both fluid and intense, allowing for free engagement with the flow of desire all around us. In childhood healthy desire is the necessary pathway to the formation of the healthy adult they are so busy creating. Using mimetic theory terminology, we might say that acquisitive mimesis in childhood is an unqualified good.

Children Do Not Become Their Own Stumbling Blocks

Yet Montessori did recognize that conflicts emerge from appropriation. Her classrooms are designed to stimulate a certain amount of conflict over scarce items, such as a single set of blocks or a limited number of a popular colored pencil and teachers are trained to respond to conflict as teaching moments. Children are taught to gaze into the face of their rival, to see the tears or anger, and to find creative solutions together. Childhood conflicts are short-lived and easily resolved, a sign of what adult conflicts might be like without the interference of pride. What we see with the relationship of a child to the necessary object is a successful binding to the mediated object without the interference of being ashamed of the mediation. We might say this also describes the artist or the saint. The object is allowed to be itself, to become real without the intrusion of the emotional charge of shame.

In childhood, the gravitational force of mimeticism is drawing the child into a process of acquisitive mimesis in which the objects do indeed fade from view but not until they have been incorporated into the child's self. Benoit Chantre in summarizing what happens to the object of mimetic rivalry rightly points out that "if I quickly come to prefer the dispute to the disputed object, this can only mean that it is first and foremost the other who obsesses me, my mediator and his supposed autonomy, more than the particular object of his desire."^x In childhood, obsession with the other's apparent autonomy and self-sufficiency is always behind the child's fascination and engagement with the mediated object. Yet the object, imbued with the being of the adult model, manages to remain a focus of attention provided the adult can preserve his position as a benign model. In this ideal student-teacher relationship, acquisitive desire remains fluid, models remain luminous, and objects remain real.

For Montessori, the natural process of acquisitive mimesis in and of itself does not necessitate an escalation to extreme, violent conflict. Or as Jean-Michel Oughourlian puts it, "Mimetic escalation is not necessarily something fatal; it can also be the way one hears the call of

paradise.”^{xi} Conflict spirals out of control when desire succumbs to pathologies such as shame at our lack of originality or the denial of our need for models. Montessori observed that unhealthy patterns of desire are not the normal expression of childhood desire, but are the outcome of authoritative and rivalrous pedagogical and parenting practices. Her focus is on keeping the object in view. A healthy relationship to objects becomes the foundation for an adult life capable of art, creativity and peaceful relationships with the world and others. If children are caused to stumble at this early stage, the foundation is damaged at its inception.

What both Montessori and Girard observed is that children are not born ashamed of their mimeticism. Shame is learned from and through interaction with shamed models. In other words, and this is the reason for Jesus’ vehemence on the subject, children do not become their own stumbling blocks. That is left for adults to accomplish. But rather than influence children with our own shortcomings, Jesus counseled us to imitate children, to forgo our false pride in the illusion of our independence in favor of authentic childlike humility. The very real danger is of false pride leading to shameful relationships with our models, including Jesus himself.

Benign Mediation

Given that advice, what, then, is the role of the teacher in a Montessori inspired classroom? Put simply, it is to get out of the child’s way. Montessori wrote that “By education must be understood the active *help* given to the normal expansion of the life of the child.”^{xii} Paradoxically, that active help took the form of active restraint on the part of the teacher on behalf of the liberty of the child. “It is necessary rigorously to avoid the *arrest of spontaneous movements and the imposition of arbitrary tasks.*”^{xiii} The “spontaneous movements” are valued as the outward sign of the child’s “impressive work of inner formation” and interfering with that expression is the cardinal Montessori sin. “We cannot know the consequences of suffocating a *spontaneous action* at the time when the child is just beginning to be active: perhaps we suffocate *life itself.*”^{xiv}

Therefore Montessori was relentlessly critical of the traditional authoritarian teacher who reserved all freedom and spontaneity for herself. In that case, it is the teacher who stands as supreme model in front of the classroom and the children who are consigned to the role of observer. Montessori wished to reverse this completely, freeing the children from confinement to desks and chairs so that it is they who are spontaneous and free and the teacher who is quietly observing. Rather than children fearfully acquiescing to the bidding of adults, adults would become loving followers of the liberated child.

But the natural concern of the women who she first inducted into this method over 100 years ago—and the ongoing concern of well-meaning teachers to this day—is the fear of a classroom spinning out of control. Freedom for children is often equated with chaos, disorder, and a loss of safety. One can think of this as the strong-man model of classroom order with the teacher as strongman and the children comprising various tribes who, if left to their own devices, will deteriorate into an all against all conflict. This is the argument of the powerful tyrant and when made by teachers or parents is the set-up for the infamous power struggle, which is a mimetic rivalry involving a loss of difference between the most different of all rivals, a dependent child and his caretaker.

Montessori's genius was in her recognition that rivalry stunts growth. She understands that it is the child's earnest desire to imitate the adult who looms in the child's world as an unassailable model. There is nothing so alluring to desire as the illusion of self-sufficiency, an illusion projected by the adult to the susceptible child. However, if the adult model becomes an obstacle not only is the potential for a healthy relationship to the culture disrupted, but the model suffers damage as the illusion of self-sufficiency is shattered. In this quote, Montessori describes the child's necessary obedience to even the most outrageous or harmful adult demands:

Adults dominate children by virtue of a recognized natural right. [For the child] To question this right would be the same as attacking a kind of consecrated sovereignty. If in a primitive community a tyrant represents God, an adult to a child is divinity itself. He is simply beyond discussion. Rather than disobey, a child must keep silent and adjust himself to everything.

If he does show some resistance, this will rarely be a direct, or even intended reply to an adult's action. It will rather be a vital defense of his psychic integrity or an unconscious reaction to oppression.^{xv}

In the extreme, this is a description of a child's response to emotional or physical abuse. Less extreme and more common is the everyday irrationality of an adult in a power struggle, defending a position of authority which needs no defense. Such behavior inspires a loss of confidence that may cause the child to be worried about his safety, so utterly dependent is he on an adult who now seems the tiniest bit out of touch with reality. Yet the child resists, perhaps out of panic, perhaps hopeful for reassurance. This is the world of power struggles, of childhood temper tantrums and unfortunately of adult resentment. The adult who clings to authoritarian practices has fallen into the trap of presenting the child with a double bind:

imitate me as your model for adult being, but do not imitate me in my possession of ultimate authority on this or that issue. Of course, the more the adult defends her right to authority, the more valuable it becomes in the eyes of the child who assumes that it must indeed be the key to fulfilling the child's deepest desire, that of becoming a competent adult, since it is being defended so violently.

Yet the proper exercise of adult authority is essential for the physical and psychological safety of the child. The task of the teacher (and parent) is to exercise authority without becoming an obstacle to the child's development. A good classroom example of how to exercise proper teacherly authority is in the transition from the time for individual work to group time. The moment of the transition is decided and communicated by the teacher to the class often with a bell or a dimming of lights and a quiet, perhaps sung, invitation to "put your work away and come to the line". The line is an actual line, commonly drawn in a circle with tape on the floor, upon which the children sit with their teacher for group lessons. This time of transition is fraught with potential problems, for as we know, we must not interrupt spontaneous activity. While it is impossible to call the group to the circle at a convenient time for all the children, nevertheless the sensitive teacher gets a sense of the work cycle of the room and notices when a number of the children are finishing one work and in the process of choosing another. That is a good moment to call circle time. For those who must be interrupted, a delicate process ensues. Children know that part of the classroom rule is that they may preserve their work in its unfinished state to take up the next time class meets. If that does not satisfy, a child may insist on finishing their work before joining the circle. In this case, it may be that all the children but one have followed the teacher's call.

To insist that the one child obey the call to the line is common in authoritarian classrooms but unthinkable in the well run Montessori room. Respect for the individual simply removes the option. If the teacher does insist, however, let us imagine what might happen. First to handle the justification offered for asserting the teacher's authority at this point: It is not fair to the other children who have obeyed. If disobedience is permitted by one, won't the others imitate it and then all discipline will be lost? That is a justification from within a rivalrous relationship. It perceives the teacher in rivalry with the child for power and the children in rivalry with each other. Within relationships of respect, however, the issue does not arise because no one is trying to assert their authority over another. Children simply do not imitate the one child because in reality they all have chosen to be where they are. The teacher has not forced them to join the circle, but has invited them to come when they are ready. Those who are on the line are ready, those not on the line are not ready. There is no contest of wills, only the free exercise of each individual will.

If the teacher should insist on the child's compliance, she will be demonstrating a desire for her will to be prime which desire, of course, the child will imitate. A contest of wills will ensue in which there can be no winner. It is a lose-lose situation for in order to win the adult must disrespect the child and force her will upon him. The child will be humiliated and the adult will be exposed as a petty tyrant. Worse of all, the child's natural unabashed imitation of the adult will be tainted. Instead of exuberantly imitating, the child may become tentative and fearful thus setting up interference with his development. If the adult should surrender and the child wins, the child will rightly be fearful of assuming the role of model in the relationship.

The shift out of the double bind of adult authority – imitate me here, don't imitate me there – is made possible by Montessori's move toward respect for the developmental processes of childhood. The adult who follows the child is doing so with an attitude of reverence much as an acolyte approaches the master teacher.

Of course there are observed activities that are to be discouraged by the teacher. Montessori understood that liberty must have a shape and structure or the fears of chaos expressed earlier would indeed materialize. "The liberty of the child," she wrote,

should have as its *limit* the collective interest; as its *form*, what we universally consider good breeding. We must, therefore, check in the child whatever offends or annoys others, or whatever tends toward rough or ill-bred acts. But all the rest, – every manifestation having a useful scope, –whatever it be, and under whatever form it expresses itself, must not only be permitted, but must be *observed* by the teacher. ^{xvi}

Teachers must learn to discern the difference between the types of behavior that must be "checked" from those which are permitted. In fact, the level of proficiency in discernment is the measure of the teacher and her response the proper exercise of authority. No behavior that is harmful, rude, or hurtful is to be tolerated. The teacher firmly interrupts with a clear instruction, but not with alarm, not to frighten. Montessori believed that healthy, normal children misbehave not because they are wicked but because they have not yet been taught the proper way to behave. If a child misbehaves, the onus is on the teacher to provide the proper correction.

Again the circle time provides a good example. If a child is unable to sit quietly and is causing a disruption to the group lesson, the teacher follows a well-defined series of interactions with the child. First the teacher invokes the classroom rule of taking turns to speak during group time. She says, "Mary, it's my turn to talk. When I'm finished, it will be your turn." If the behavior continues, the teacher repeats with a slight escalation, "Mary, it's my turn to talk. Are you having trouble not talking to Amy? Maybe you'd like to sit next to someone else." Mary will

insist that she does not need to move her place, but most likely will again interrupt the group lesson. At that point the teacher says, “It looks as if you are having a hard time not talking to Amy. I can help you find another place.” And with that the teacher makes a motion as if she is going to get up from her spot on the circle to help Mary move. That is in 99 out of 100 cases sufficient to solve the problem because no child wishes to give up her autonomy.

Please notice that in this interaction the focus is on the classroom rule of taking turns to speak during circle time and not on an imposition of authority. The adult is not angry or defensive, but acts as if imparting information. It is as impersonal as a public address announcement of the arrival of the train from Newbury on track 2. In other cases of disruption, perhaps if a child is disturbing another, the preferred method is one of distraction. The teacher will approach the offending child with an invitation to look at this interesting thing or come with me to do an interesting task. If distraction failed, Rita Kramer in her biography of Maria Montessori notes that “The only punishment for misbehavior was inactivity—being given nothing to do. The obstreperous child was treated like a sick child and isolated. He soon recovered.”^{xvii} This description leaves out one important element on which the recovery depended. Though isolated at a table or in a chair set off in a corner, the child was oriented so that his fellow students, working happily and purposefully, were in full view. His recovery was the result of the inevitable draw back into the group which models for him and so makes possible his return to healthy behavior. The timing of his return is his decision.

Conclusion: Not one shall be lost

But is it possible, even for a well trained educator, to avoid all rivalry with children? My answer is Jesus’ observation that “occasions for stumbling are bound to come”. The best response on those occasions is to readily admit to your own stumbling and to ask your co-teacher to take over the lesson or activity from you. Better to be humble than to become a cause of stumbling. The woes of Jesus’ discourse are reserved, I think, for the habitually rivalrous, who have so long denied their own need for models that their feelings of pride and self-sufficiency have hardened their hearts. To take a child as one’s model, as Jesus suggests we do, is an act of humility that perhaps only a child can inspire. The disciples’ question about greatness is a question about self-sufficiency. Which of us, they want to know, is the one whom all the others should envy? Each of the disciples is in essence asking to be designated as an object of worship. By answering their question with a child, Jesus is attempting to invert their desire. Rather than desiring to be worshipped, he teaches, desire to be like a child who, in perfect humility, knows his own lack of originality and is unashamed of his need for models.

Immediately following the discourse on stumbling is the parable of the lost sheep. I believe this parable has been interpreted too metaphorically, taking the one lost sheep to represent any one of many marginalized peoples in our communities, from the mentally ill and homeless to those we call our enemies. But I think the object of the metaphor is less removed than that, for the verse that introduces the parable tells us who the sheep represent. Jesus says, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven." It is a lost child whom the Shepherd seeks and rejoices to have found. The 99 left behind represent the normal, healthy children who have not been formed in rivalry, who remain close to the Shepherd knowing both how much they need him and that he can be trusted to never cause them to stumble. It is the faithful ones who wait patiently while the shepherd takes as much time as needed to find the lost sheep and bring him home.

Coming home to this sheepfold means coming home to abide securely in God's care, something which requires healthy, unashamed patterns of desire. If we form our children in rivalry, they learn to deny their need for the Shepherd. We have heard Jesus warning about putting "a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me". To stumble is to lose faith in the beneficence of models, and so to lose the capacity for love and worship. The parable ends, "So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." May that verse be our inspiration as we return to our congregations to take up the work of teaching with humility in open admiration of the little ones in our care.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Montessori, Maria, *The Absorbent Mind*, trans. Claude A. Claremont (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967), p. 107
- ^{iv} Alison, James, *op. cit.*, p. 28
- ^v Girard, René, *Violence and Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 146
- ^{vi} Girard, René with Peirpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2007), p. 57
- ^{vii} Montessori, Maria, *op. cit.*, p. 18
- ^{viii} Montessori, Maria, *op. cit.*, p. 33
- ^{ix} Lillard, Paula Polk, *Montessori: A Modern Approach* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972)
- ^x Chantre, Benoît, *The Combray Steeple: René Girard or the Final Law* (paper presented at Imitatio Summer School, 2009), p. 9
- ^{xi} Oughourlian, Jean-Michel, *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. Eugene Webb (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 48
- ^{xii} Montessori, Maria, *The Montessori Method*, trans. Anne E. George (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1964), p. 104
- ^{xiii} Montessori, Maria, *Ibid.*, p. 88
- ^{xiv} Montessori, Maria, *Ibid.*, p. 87
- ^{xv} Montessori, Maria, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J. (New York: Ballantine, 1972), p. 152
- ^{xvi} Montessori, Maria, *The Montessori Method*, trans. Anne E. George (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1964), p. 87
- ^{xvii} Kramer, Rita, *Maria Montessori: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 120

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In 2007, Ross co-founded the Raven Foundation with husband Keith. Based on the principles of mimetic theory, the foundation seeks to make religion reasonable, violence unthinkable and peace a possibility by challenging conventional wisdom and opening the door to new ways of thinking. Visit the website at <http://www.ravenfoundation.org> or email Suzanne, ssross@ravenfoundation.org.

Suzanne puts her theatrical flair to great creative use in this endeavor, often utilizing the language, imagery, and music of pop culture to illustrate key points about the world view. Her first book, *The Wicked Truth: When Good People Do Bad Things*, initiated this effort by providing the thinking person's guide to the wildly successful Broadway musical *Wicked*. The upcoming book, *The Wicked Truth About Love: The Tangles of Desire*, explores patterns of romantic love and how to create a fulfilling relationship.