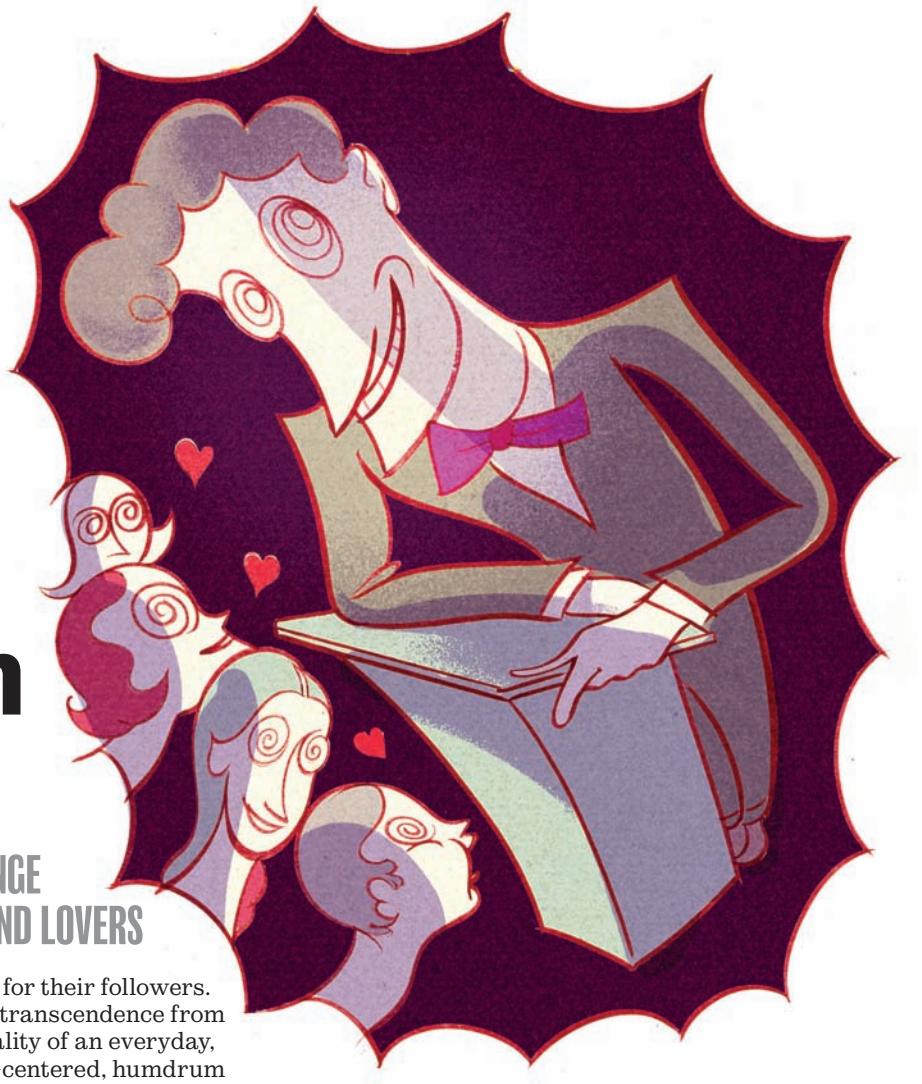

Going with the Force

ANTHRO COURSE EXAMINES THE STRANGE ATTRACTION OF GURUS, DICTATORS, AND LOVERS

AS A GRAD STUDENT at Columbia University in the late 1960s, Charles Lindholm was swept up in a student antiwar riot that was stormed by armed police. Back then, says Lindholm, "there were a lot of gurus floating around the place, and friends of mine — rational people — sort of disappeared."

In both cases, says the College of Arts and Sciences professor of anthropology and University Professor, people freely, even eagerly, surrendered their autonomy to a mob or a cult movement. It was the beginning of Lindholm's fascination with charisma, passion, and similar irrational motivations, and it wasn't too long before he worked romantic love into the mix.

"What is romance for in the first place? What does it do for you?" Lindholm quietly asks the fifteen students taking his course Lovers and Leaders: The Anthropology of Romance and Charisma. Lindholm believes that what romance does for us is similar to what charismatic leaders do for their followers. Both offer transcendence from the rationality of an everyday, individual-centered, humdrum existence. So too do things like sports mania, religious observance, and celebrity worship, but love, he says, is the "most powerful and most central" alternative to the charisma of mass movements.

"Don't ignore the desire of people for a collective experience and to imagine themselves as part of something greater than a bunch of rational individuals," Lindholm tells his students, who study theorists of charisma and passion, such as Hume, Nietzsche, and Freud, along with case studies of such leaders as Hitler and Charles Manson, and stories of romantic love, like that of Romeo and Juliet.

And while one might guess that college students are more comfortable talking about romance than about Nazis, class member William Lewis (UNI'09) says that's not the case. "I'm not in a cult, but I'm very much involved in our loved-based society," he says. "It's harder to step back and approach romance academically, to objectively discuss it."

"It's possible that what we think is transcendent is really biological."
— CAS Professor Charles Lindholm

Lindholm believes that's part of anthropology's challenge. "We're always thinking about everything that's normal and asking, why is it?" he says. It's apparent in the loosely structured class discussion that, at least with love, Lindholm is open to new answers.

One student responds to his question about the roots of romance by talking about two subspecies of prairie voles, small rodents that range across America's grasslands. A single genetic switch makes one type of vole monogamous, while the other type continues to play the field, or grassland, as it were.

"It's possible," Lindholm responds, "that what we think is transcendent is really biological."

ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC PALMA

Still, he brings up research that he and two graduate students conducted years ago on the views of romance in different cultures, among people such as African Bushmen and Pakistani tribes. They found that the ideal of romantic relationships was strongest in highly individualistic and scattered societies, which include both hunter-gatherer communities and, it turns out, our own.

"American society is very complex, but in a lot of ways, we're more like hunter-gatherers than like a traditional tribal culture," he tells the class. "We're all on our own out there, trying to make our way."

These cultural distinctions imply that the ideal of romance can change over time, and Lindholm asks for his students' take on the current trends in romance and marriage.

One suggests that it was easier for young people of previous generations to commit to marriage because "people didn't live so long." A lifelong commitment "isn't such a big deal if you're going to die when you're, like, thirty," the student says. Another disagrees with Lindholm's contention that many students in the class will eventually sign prenuptial agreements. "It just seems like such a dooming step," she says.

And according to Lindholm, the deep, charismatic link between what leads people into love and what draws them to mass movements means that a discussion of where romance is heading is much more than idle chitchat. "If the romantic ideal has been historically developed, it could disappear," he tells his class. "And if you don't have a relationship that leads to a feeling of transcendence, where are people going to find that sense of completeness that they need?"

For now at least, Lindholm says, he's not worried: romance is very much alive. "Romance is still the disease everybody wants to catch," he says. "I tell the class that we're going to look at it in a detached way, with historical context, but that doesn't mean that you're now inoculated." **CHRIS BERDIK** B