Getting to the Heart of Valentine's Day
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I was born on Valentine's Day, and I married a heart doctor, so this particular holiday has always had a special meaning for me. How did this Valentine's Day begin? Its origins are shrouded in mystery, but it takes us back to both pagan Roman and early Christian days. The roots of the holiday are steeped in sex and fertility. For 800 years,, the ancient Roman spring festival of Lupercalia was celebrated on February 15.   It was dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture as well as to Rome's founders, Romulus and Remus. Priests of the Luperci order gathered at a cave where the twins Romulus and Remus were thought to have been raised by a she-wolf or "lupa."A goat was sacrificed for fertility and a dog for purification. Boys sliced the goat's skin into strips, dipped it into the sacrificial blood, and went around slapping ladies with the goat hide to make them fertile. Later, all the ladies' names were placed in an urn, and gentlemen would choose a name. The couple would be paired sexually for a year, which, happily, often led to marriage. Needless to say, it was a very popular holiday.

In 498, the Pope Gelasius decided that it was a little TOO popular. He declared the lottery system "unchristian" and decided to recast it as a Christian holiday dedicated to St. Valentine. Men and women would choose the names of saints from an urn, instead. They would emulate the lives of the saints for the year. (We can only imagine the disappointment of the young Roman men.)   Old habits die hard, and Roman men continued to send notes of affection to women on this day.

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, there are at least two St. Valentines, according to legend. Archeologist recently unearthed a Roman catacomb and an ancient church dedicated to St. Valentine, who apparently was a real person. We just don't know which "Valentine" Pope Gelasius had in mind. Both were third-century Christian martyrs who were put to death on the same day, one an Italian priest and physician and the other the Bishop of Terni. Butler's *Lives of the Saints* tells both stories in an almost identical manner.

Legend tells us that the Roman Emperor Claudius II declared that married men were too emotionally involved and made poor soldiers. He, therefore, outlawed marriages for young men. Valentine, taking pity on young lovers, married them in secret despite the edict. Claudius had the young priest arrested and threw him into prison. His jailer, Asterius, had a blind daughter, and begged Valentine to cure her. Miraculously, Valentine restored her sight with the depth of his faith. When

Valentine refused to give up his religion, Claudius had him beaten with clubs and beheaded on February 14, 270. Before he died, he wrote a last letter to the jailer's daughter and signed it, "From Your Valentine, "the traditional signature we use today. So Valentine wrote the very first valentine.

The day of Valentine's death was decreed by Pope Gelasius as Valentine's Day, a day of religious devotion. However, sex and love continued to stick to the holiday. It was traditionally the day that birds started to mate, and the custom arose to exchange letters, gloves and gifts on this day to one's beloved. According to UCLA medieval scholar, Henry Ansgar Kelly, it was Geoffrey Chaucer who first linked Valentine's Day with romance. In 1381, he wrote a poem in honor of the engagement of England's King Richard II and Anne of Bohemia. By the mid-18th century, Englishmen of all classes exchanged gifts and cards on this day. Gradually, printed cards replaced hand-written ones by the end of the 18th century. Postage was cheap, and people began mailing their notes. In 1840's, American Esther Howland, the Mother of the Valentine, made the first mass-produced valentines in America of lace, ribbons and colorful pictures, known as "scrap "and the American tradition of sending greeting cards was born. Today, one billion valentine cards are sent every year, 25% of all cards ever sent. In 1969, the Catholic Church dropped Valentine's Day from the official calendar of Catholic feasts, but some parishes still celebrate it.

Steeped in history and mystery, Valentine's Day continues to delight young and old with the chance to express our love and affection.