

The meaning and positive psychology of love

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There is no ill that love cannot heal, no problem love cannot solve, and no evil love cannot overcome. If hope is the oxygen that sustains life, then love is the sunshine that nurtures it. Love is the fountain of well-being, the cardinal principle of spirituality, and the touchstone of true religion.

It is no wonder that preachers from all religions sing its praise in unison and positive psychologists around the globe tout its benefits. Millions of dollars have been spent in research on unlimited love. Conferences are devoted to sharing the latest scientific findings on compassionate love and altruism.

It is a good thing that love has captured the attention of top scientists and religious leaders. The world would be a far better place, only if we can harness a tiny bit of the transformative power of love. Indeed, love is the only miracle freely accessible to all. It is the only gift that multiplies when we give. Yet, love continues to be in short supply.

Obstacles to Love



Why? Why do we deprive each other and deprive ourselves of what we all possess in abundance? Why do we withhold the only thing that everyone really wants, the one thing that can bring us true happiness? Who has poisoned the stream of love? Why do gatekeepers spread fear and hate to turn people away from Heaven's Gate? Why are there so many walking

wounded in faith communities? What has turned the human heart into stone? What prevents us from doing the most natural thing – to love and be loved?

When we observe human interactions in families, churches and organizations, often it is the trivial things that obstruct the free flow of love. These include petty jealousy, envy, competitions, personality clashes, careless remarks, angry words, rudeness, inconsideration, insecurity, mistrust, suspicion, pride, elitism, miscommunication, misunderstanding, gossiping, backstabbing, and one-upmanship.

These are the stuffs tragedies are made of. They may appear to be the rather innocuous, garden-variety human foibles, yet they are capable of destroying countless lives, families and communities.

Have you ever witnessed how mean people can become, whenever their power or status is threatened? Even an argument over a non-consequential issue can escalate into a fight to the death, because neither party wants to lose.

Have you ever observed how abusive religious leaders can become, when they encounter resistance in their efforts to control people's beliefs and behaviors? Hell is for all those who dare to challenge their spiritual authority, because there is no greater evil than insubordination.

What has happened to the gentle voice of reason? What has happened to grace and kindness? In the endless competition, most people have come to believe that might is right. They are afraid that showing kindness may expose themselves to attack and harm. Fear has driven away love!

Therefore, it is not enough just to map out the benefits of love. Nor is it sufficient to identify the processes of altruistic acts. To bring about real change in the world, a mature positive psychology would need to address and overcome the destructive forces that impede and corrode love.

A Love Test

The Greek language has three words for love – spiritual love (agape), brotherly love (philia), and passionate and sexual love (eros). I have written about passionate love elsewhere. This test will focus on spiritual and brotherly love.

Love is more than a feeling. It is also a motivational force that compels us to action. Ultimately, authentic love is a principle to live by, and a core value that defines the essence of our being: who we really are, when everything is stripped away from us.

Here is a little love test to find out how much genuine affection and compassion you really have for others.

Do you habitually and consistently —

1. Engage in deeds of kindness?
2. Bring happiness to others?
3. Embrace those different from you?
4. Consider other people's feelings?
5. Have other people's best interest in mind?
6. Share with those who are less fortunate?
7. Help others without expecting any return?
8. Stand up for the oppressed?
9. Fight against injustice?
10. Show gratitude and repay kindness?
11. Show compassion to those who are hurting?
12. Empower and build up others?
13. Sacrifice self-interest in order to serve others?
14. Love and pray for your enemies?
15. Forgive those who have hurt you?
16. Overlook other people's faults?
17. Remain faithful to your friends when they are in trouble?
18. Treat others with unconditional positive regard?
19. Treat people with sincerity and honesty?
20. Apologize and make amends whenever you have hurt others?

If you find yourself having to fight against most of the above questions, you may want to take a good, hard look at yourself and wonder whether you have lost that gracious gift of love.

A Portrait of Love

The 13th chapter of I Corinthians in the Bible provides one of the most eloquent statements on love. Here is a portion of that chapter:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” (I Corinthians 13:4 – 8)

What a glorious portrait of love! It is idealistic without glossing over human frailties. Its humanity is derived from its spirituality. Love is intentional without being conscious of its noble intention. To love is more than doing what is right; it involves doing what is good and kind. In giving, one receives. In enduring, one finds happiness. This sums up the mature positive psychology of love.

The Law of Love

To plummet the depth of love or to probe into the secret chamber of the soul, invariably one is confronted with the transcendental and spiritual nature of love. At the deepest level, we are all yearning for the kind of love that connects us not only with human family, but also with its Creator.

Love is not just one of the attributes of God; it is the essence of God’s nature, because God is love (1 John 4:8). Unconditional and unlimited love is a state of being that belongs to God, so claims Dr. Stephen Post, President of the [Institute of Unlimited Love](#). To participate in divine nature is to transform love from a state of feeling into a state of being.

Divine love is embodied in Jesus as illustrated by these verses in the New Testament of the Bible:

“For God so loves the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” (1 John 3:16)

In sum, the law of love is giving. To love is to give of ourselves generously and compassionately, in spite of fear and hate. This law demands that we love God unconditionally and love others unselfishly.

The Criterion of Love

If love comes from God (1 John 4:7), why is it that some of the meanest people are fervent believers? Where is God's love in them? How can we tell whether someone is a loving person? Is there a criterion to determine whether we are really practicing the law of love? Jesus has given us a yardstick to measure the presence of true love. It is stated in terms of the greatest commandments in the Law:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39).

With respect to our love for God, the criterion is one of unconditional surrender that involves every aspects of our being. It is an all-consuming love that reaches the deepest recesses of our souls and the highest level of our intellect.

Such demand of total devotion to God immediately brings to mind the dangers of religious fanaticism and radical fundamentalism. How much atrocity has been committed against humanity in God's name? To justify violence on grounds of enacting God's truth and doing God's will poses the greatest threat to a civilized society.

Thank God that the greatest commandment does not stand by itself; it must be balanced by love for people, for our neighbors.

With respect to our love for neighbors, the criterion is one of consideration and kindness. Such other-directed kindness is limited by self-interest or self-love. Individuals full of self-loathing are not capable of loving others. Similarly, individuals who are totally preoccupied with self-interest are also incapable of loving others.

This second commandment serves as a powerful corrective not only for excesses of self-love, but also for religious fanaticism. Before one inflicts pain on others in God's name, simply asks: Do I want others to treat me the same way? This simple exercise of the golden rule can greatly reduce spiritual abuse.

These two commandments on love are two sides of the same coin: it is not possible to fulfill one without the other. We are created for God and for each other so that we may experience, express and realize the full potential of love.

Those who claim to love God but hate their neighbors are liars (1 John 4:20). Anyone who has truly experienced God's love and who walks in God's love cannot help but be conduits of God's love.

By the same token, those who claim to love people but hate God are also self-deceiving. "Every one who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7, 8).

The logic here is simple enough. The ability to love all people, including those who hurt us and cause us troubles, can only come from individuals who have been transformed by the Source of unlimited and unconditional love.

Dr. Gerald Jampolsky, in his book "Love is Letting Go of Fear" (1985), states that we can experience inner peace and the freedom to love, only when we are "motivated to experience a personal transformation towards a life of giving and Love, and away from a life of getting and fear" (p.13).

Conclusion

Where do we go from here? What can be done to stop the cycles of violence in the Middle-East conflict? Is there a peaceful approach, such as Gandhi's "soul force", to overcome terrorism? How about the problems of poverty, oppression and injustice in the world? If love is the answer, why can't we find love's healing presence?

Paradoxically, while the world has become smaller, the distance between individuals has become greater. People seem more connected with computers than with each other. We respond to the increasing social complexity and diversity by creating more and more rules and obstacles that separate people.

Families are unraveling, and communities are disintegrating. Individuals may be experiencing more alienation and loneliness than in the by-gone eras. Is there any hope of creating a culture of love that knows no boundaries and transcends hierarchy?

All the sermons, mission statements and even scientific findings on love have not made this world a kinder, gentler place. Is love an intractable illusion? Has progress programmed love out of our lives?

As I am struggling with these rather depressing questions, Mother Theresa's life gives me reason to be optimistic. As an embodiment of compassionate love, she has this advice for us in her book "A Simple Path" (1995, p.99):

- We must grow in love and to do this we must go on loving and loving and giving and giving until it hurts – the way Jesus did.
- Do ordinary things with extraordinary love: little things like caring for the sick and the homeless, the lonely and the unwanted, washing and cleaning for them.

Where did she find strength for such extraordinary love? Her answer: "I am only a little wire – God is the power" (p.xi).

Perhaps, the secret to Mother Teresa's path to love can be summed up as follows:

- We need to experience God's healing and love before we can become a healing presence.
- We need to live in close commune with God before we can live in solidarity with the suffering humanity.
- To practice the law of love, we need to love Christ and model after him.
- There is no greater happiness than devoting one's life to loving God and loving the poor and the suffering.

You may point out that there are other pathways to love, such as the enlightenment of Compassion Buddha or the Confucius teaching. But Mother Teresa has given us a prototype of an authentic Christian love that is as powerful as it is simple.

Positive psychology, in its emphasis on positive experiences, may have overlooked the paradox that love is more likely to be found in the midst of suffering and pain.

Organized religions, in their obsession with power and success, have forgotten that their mission is in healing the broken hearted, feeding the hungry and releasing the oppressed.

In journeying down that simple path with Mother Teresa, we may be surprised by the discovery that love in all its purity can only be found in realizing our own brokenness and our need for healing.