Surrendering to The Depth

And

Living in Love

By

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To understand love, it is important to appreciate who Jesus was and what he taught. Jesus and Christianity profoundly influence how western culture understands the significance and practice of love. Even those who do not consider themselves Christian are nevertheless influenced by the deeply embedded cultural assumptions derived from our Christian heritage. Love is at the heart of Jesus’ message and life. However, the interpretation of Jesus’ teachings and his role in our spiritual lives, especially as regards love, is distorted in Western Christianity. Cynthia Bourgeault, an episcopal priest, scholar, author and contemporary mystic, offers an in-depth analysis of Jesus’ core teachings based upon recent scholarship. It fits well with what I have studied and experienced. The following insights are based upon her book, *The Wisdom Jesus.*

Following Jesus’ death, his disciples carried his message to many different places and cultures. Some went south to Africa. Others went to the east including China. Others, the Syriac Christians, stayed near Jesus’ homeland and continued to speak and teach in his native language, Aramaic. Western Christianity evolved from those who brought his message to the Greco-Roman world. Although we have long assumed that the message of Jesus, the Gospel, was fundamentally the same everywhere, that is not the case. The assumptions of each culture created a frame into which Jesus’ message was made to fit. Greco-Roman, Hellenistic culture which we inherited was authoritarian, hierarchical, and celebrated analytical thought as the principal means for conducting life and understanding reality. The Christianity we know today is a hybrid of this mindset and Jesus’ own perspective which was quite different. Western culture is a left-brain construct. Jesus offered a unitive, holistic right-brain spirituality. The essence of who he is and what he taught has become distorted by forcing it into a frame of reference that is antithetical to his core message about love and its foundation, spiritual emptying, or kenosis.

Beyond the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament there were many others. Two, the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary, may be as old as the New Testament Gospels according to some scholars. I believe that they present, in some respects, a fuller version of what Jesus actually said and did than the canonical Gospels. Traditional Christianity presents Jesus as a savior figure who through his death appeased God and won our salvation. A god who demands a blood sacrifice to assure his favor and save us from hell is a monstrous deity, even though it is consistent with some New Testament themes. In the Gospel of Thomas and those parts of the Gospel of Mary that have been preserved, Jesus is not presented as a savior, but as a spiritual teacher whose mission is to guide us into the internal Kingdom of Heaven. Even throughout the canonical Gospels Jesus is quoted as saying the Kingdom of Heaven is within, not out there or up above. Moreover, he says it is at hand, now, not in the future or after we die. It is important to keep in mind that Jesus transformed the lives of many through the power of his presence and insights well before he died. They entered the Kingdom of Heaven, not through his death, but through following him on the inward path that he modeled and taught. These teachings are found throughout the New Testament and in greater depth in the Gospel of Thomas and as well as the Gospel of Mary.

The New Testament Gospels quote Jesus as saying, “Seek and you shall find.” The Gospel of Thomas gives a more complete rendition of this saying:

“If you are searching, then you must not stop until you find. When you find however, you will become troubled. Your confusion will give way to wonder. In wonder you will reign over all things. Your sovereignty will be your rest.”

A sincere, in depth, inner search will upend your sense of self, reality and God. It will be disorienting and may feel like a great loss. Ultimately, however, it will bring you into a far more solid, meaningful, and empowered life than you had ever imagined possible.

Everyone accepts that love was the cornerstone of Jesus’ message. In western Christianity this is essentially boiled down to “be nice.” The standard Christian assumption is that if we are kind and ethical as well as profess belief in a prescribed set of dogmas and participate in certain rituals we will then earn the Kingdom of Heaven which is not within but a place we go to after death. This is not what Jesus taught. He did not condition entry into the Kingdom of Heaven upon submitting to rules, believing in dogmas, or participating in rituals. The Kingdom of Heaven was found through a radical change of mind or what the New Testament calls metanoia and an unconditional emptying or surrender which is called kenosis. These complementary processes lead to a profoundly different experience of our relationship with ourselves, God and others and our understanding of love.

The ordinary assumption of most people, and especially those influenced by the Hellenistic outlook of western culture, is that we are all separate entities, distinct from each other, nature and God. This fragmented perception of reality is referred to as dualistic consciousness. This dualistic model of reality, codified in language, is our principal instrument for negotiating life, controlling nature, developing laws for ethical behavior and comprehending our relationship with God. Jesus offered a radically different, non-dual approach. Instead of emphasizing distinction and control he taught that the essence of human reality is oneness both with each other and God. “Love one another as yourself.” is not an admonition to first love yourself so that you will then be able to act in a loving way toward others. It is a statement that you and the other are not truly separate and there must be no real boundary between the love you give to yourself and the love that radiates out to include all those your life touches. When Jesus said that he and the Father were one, he was not describing something unique to himself, but a universal reality. He makes the same point again in the quote from the Gospel of John, “I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me as I in you.” When there is no ultimate distinction between you and God, spirituality becomes something radically different from the spirituality most of us grew up with. Instead of trying to act righteously or lovingly, we are called to allow the flow of divine love to move through us. Nor is there any need to try to appease an external deity in order to earn its favor when at the deepest part of your psyche you are already one with God. Appreciating that Jesus was a teacher of non-dual spirituality brings his message into a sharper and more profound focus.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of Heaven was found through a radical change of mind or what the New Testament calls metanoia and an unconditional emptying or surrender which is called kenosis. These complementary processes lead to a profoundly different experience of our relationship with ourselves, God and others and our understanding of love. Metanoia is usually translated as “repent,” as in acknowledge your sins and ask forgiveness for them. The actual meaning of meta noia, however, is “beyond mind,” or alternatively, “larger or more inclusive mind.” That is, we are called to go beyond our ordinary dualistic mentality and share in Jesus’ wholistic vision. This is a much more radical demand than merely being sorry for our bad deeds. The dualistic, small mind of ordinary ego awareness is a very limited form of perception that misses the richness and interconnectedness of our own emotional, instinctual, creative and spiritual aspects as well as our intimate connection with nature. The metanoia that Jesus’ teaching calls forward is a profound reorientation in perspective in which we let go of rigid, fearful egoic mind with our stories about who we are and our models of reality in favor of a direct, experiential immersion in life both externally and internally. This requires that we forego our identification with roles, and certainties as well as investment in control whether internal or external as a way of ensuring a safe or meaningful life. Instead, we are invited to live from the greater mind beyond ego, immersed in the wonder and ecstasy of being at one with the universe, and trusting in the divine Spirit within to guide and support us as we harmonize and integrate our inner life drawing ever closer to our God given true nature. We are called to live in faith and love, rather than certitudes and control.

This new mind cannot be achieved without a radical emptying which the New Testament calls kenosis. Clinging to anything whether it be possessions, status, certainties, defenses, or even life itself traps us in the small mind of ego. Jesus modeled and taught this throughout his ministry. Each thing we cling to is like a dam impeding the flow of divine love that seeks to well up from our depth blessing us and the world around us. The requirement of kenosis or emptying may sound like a great sacrifice, but it is more like cleaning out the trash to make room for something that is incomparably better.

Only the free-flowing love emanating from our depth will lead to unshakeable peace and joy. There is a common assumption among spiritual seekers that disconnecting from the physical realm through ascetic practices and even celibacy helps us become more spiritual and thus closer to God who is thought to reside in an ethereal, non-physical realm. Jesus taught and modeled something quite different. Rather than disconnecting, he immersed himself in life. His behavior was even considered shocking by the ascetic disciples of John the Baptist. The path to God that Jesus offered was not through disconnecting, but through emptying so that God’s love could flow without restriction. God is known in the experience of love, not in the rejection of our human, physical reality.

The process of letting go is not an exercise in self-discipline or asceticism. And it is more than the manifestation of a sincere intention to act lovingly. These well intended practices are all creations of egoic mind grounded in effort and self-control. The essence of Jesus’ spiritual path was to be open to whatever life presents, but cling to nothing. This is the heart of his message which we have forgotten because it is so different from what our culture and spiritual traditions have presumed. Peace and joy are the spontaneous, natural corollaries of unimpeded divine love as it flows through us, and the proper flow of divine love depends on metanoia and kenosis. This is the pearl of great price Jesus spoke of. It is the bounty of the overflowing bushel of grain. It is the mansion the father has prepared for us. It is beyond anything we could ever have hoped for.

Hopefully, this understanding of Jesus’ message will cast new light on old scriptural themes. The first beatitude summarizes the essence of everything we have discussed to this point. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The “poor in spirit” are the humble ones, those who are not caught up in egoic rigidities. The kingdom of heaven, God’s reign within, is theirs. They are, therefore, blessed. Divine love, peace and joy fills their lives, not in some post death realm, but in the present. The divine bounty is not conditioned upon how hard or long you have worked, like the landowner who paid the first and last workers the same. The bounty is there for anyone who is willing to open his or her heart to receive it. No one, however, can do it for anyone else. The bridesmaids whose lamps were empty could not borrow oil from those who had plenty. Each must practice their own version of metanoia and kenosis in order to tap into the divine love that is their birthright.

The Beatitudes concisely outline the perspective that will enable a person to live in the greater mind. The first Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” is the foundation for all the rest. The humility of those who are “poor in spirit” allows them to be open and receptive. Nurturing a spirit of receptivity is the beginning of the spiritual path. Without it, love will not flow. We must put aside our assumptions and defenses becoming empty vessels willing to be filled up from our own divine center. The transpersonal psychiatrist, Arthur Deikman, describes it as follows:

“Receptive Consciousness allows connection to be experienced and creates altruistic bonds. It is the source of felt meaning and offers the possibility of the direct experience of reality. It is the vehicle of empathy flow and merger. (In contrast) the Instrumental Consciousness (of the small mind or egoic mentality) is dedicated to individual survival. It evolved to gain food and defend against attack. It focuses on boundaries, difference, form and distinction. In the context of Receptive Consciousness meaning is felt through connection. Goodness and beauty are known in the moment through merging. In “serving the task” the questions don’t arise. Instrumental Consciousness can ask the big questions but cannot hear the answers. It leads to meaninglessness, alienation, and the fear of dying.”

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” When love moves you to deeply connect, it also makes you vulnerable to the pain of loss. To quote Ken Wilbur, “Real love will take you far beyond yourself; and therefore real love will devastate you.” Mourning is a heartbreaking path to emptiness. Yet in the emptiness and desolation, space is made for divine compassion to enter from within. Many, if not most, people who begin the inner journey do so because they have experienced a significant loss that is forcing them to reorient their lives and reconsider their priorities. This is the blessing mourning brings for those who can accept it.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” Bourgeault suggests that a better translation for “meek” would be “gentled” as in domesticated. We are all driven by wild animal passions, not just in the sexual domain, but in every aspect of life. The drives to accrue power and/or wealth, the inclinations toward territoriality, and our tendency to distrust the stranger are all hard wired as aspects for our need for safety. They will rule us if we do not consciously choose to face them and actively determine to live from a more profound, spiritual space. If we risk the way of the gentled there will be an earth and vibrant civilization to inherit. If we do not contain our animal passions we will be destroyed personally and take the world with us.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Righteousness in the biblical sense was not about behaving correctly as most contemporary people would assume. It is about living within and out of divine energy. Bourgeault describes it as an “energy charged sphere of holy presence” and “to be anchored in God’s own aliveness.”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” This is about the flow of compassion. Compassion for others stimulates a willingness to receive compassion oneself and vice versa. Compassion toward oneself is most deeply felt when it arises from the inner divine essence motivating the ego to behave similarly. It is a continuous flow, from the deep to the ego to the outer world.

“Blessed are the pure of heart for they will see God.” The “pure of heart” are those whose heart is not divided. They have a singleness of intention and that intention is to be true to the divine essence within them. This can be conceptualized in two different ways. “I choose to live a radically authentic life, without pretense, self-deception or conformity to externally imposed social constructs.” Or: “Every action I take and every choice I make I want to be grounded in love.” Both of these ultimately include the other and they will each enable the awareness of a divine presence energizing and supporting them.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.” Those who understand and live in the spirit of the preceding Beatitudes are no longer inclined to divide the world up into good guys and bad guys. They are acutely aware that we are all ultimately one and part of the same divine source. Respect and compassion motivate every interaction. Their inner peace flows easily out into the world and can have a powerful healing influence. Although they may decry the cruelty and injustice they see around them, they can sense the wounded souls of the perpetrators that lie hidden behind their egoic shells.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Those who live in divine energy, the righteous, may well be misunderstood or rejected by the greater culture. Because they are not moved by the rigid or divisive expectations of those who live out of little mind they can easily be seen as a threat to the stability of the common order. This can have severe consequences, but they don’t really matter. Living in divine energy means that little or egoic mind has little influence. Ego and the self-identity that goes with it is merely a shell. What matters is the oneness with the divine spark within and no amount of persecution or judgement can overcome it.

The insights of Jesus, as I understand them, are not merely the theological musings of a spiritual teacher. The reflect a long tradition of human wisdom known as the perennial philosophy. They have such power and longevity because they are rooted in experience. They describe a reality known deeply by many and available to anyone who looks within seeking personal truth. Although expressed in spiritual or theological terms, these teachings about the inner life are also expressed in more secular terms in some forms of psychodynamic psychology, most especially in Jungian psychology. The path to wholeness which Jung called Individuation is remarkably similar to Jesus’ Kingdom of Heaven, as outlined above. Moreover, contemporary research into the nature of bonding and love, as well as the burgeoning field of transpersonal psychology all support or echo Jesus’ message. Love is the foundation of a meaningful life and learning how to love is our principal human task.

As I look back over my life as a spiritual seeker, psychotherapist, and spiritual director, one thing stands out above all else. The ego, that part of me of which I am most aware and which I identify as myself, is only a part of my reality. This observation, of course, is not a new insight. There are myriad spiritual and psychological systems that posit unconscious and superconscious dimensions to the psyche. Some are esoteric, derived from various spiritualist traditions. Some are psychospiritual, often derived from Buddhist and Hindu traditions. And others are psychological, generally based on either the work of Freud or Jung. My perspective is not drawn from any of the above, although the insights of Taoism, Buddhism, Jung and above all the teachings of Jesus have enriched and clarified my understanding. After working with multiple clients for many decades, I have found that everyone possesses a higher intelligence that loves them unconditionally. It is readily available and will guide any who are willing toward becoming their most authentic and thus best self. It offers truth and healing grounded in love.

This higher intelligence knows you from the inside out. It knows all that you have done, all you have experienced, all you have felt, and longed for, and it loves you without reservation. There are many ways to connect with it, most of which are readily available to anyone willing to take the time to be open to it. Although it can feel a bit intimidating to realize that there is something wiser than you within your own psyche observing every aspect of your life, there is also great comfort in knowing that you are not alone even when you feel isolated or disconnected from those around you. Though you may feel no one understands you, this presence does. It knows you better than you do yourself and loves you with a pure, unreserved embrace.

My awareness of this extraordinary presence within us is not based on any belief system, but on my direct experience. I have found that it is not necessary to believe in anything to have a deeply fulfilling life grounded in truth and love. By allowing myself to receive the love and guidance that this presence offers so readily, my clients and I have found a direct path to an authentic, naturally joyful life.

This path is not always easy. Facing the truth of one's wounds, self-deception and shame is painful and disorienting, but this presence, which I prefer to call the deep Self, and others call Spirit or Soul, will support and guide us through whatever we must face to live ever freer and more meaningful lives. Our ultimate authority, strength, and comfort lie within us. It is closer to us than we are to ourselves. There is no need to search for it or try to earn it through right behavior or aligning oneself with some external authority such as a church or guru. All we need to do is open our hearts and say “yes” to a loving presence that is eager to hold us close and show us our unique path to wholeness.

Those who are willing to live in a constant spirit of “yes” to this inner presence of love will be transformed by it. Imagine how it would feel to be enthusiastically embraced by one who knows you inside and out. Imagine how it would feel to be held tenderly with delight and respect by someone fully aware of all the bad and foolish things you have done and still thinks you are wonderful. This is the welcome the deep Self offers us if only we would say “yes” and allow it into our hearts. Combined with a commitment to truth, this "yes" will inevitably lead to the emergence of what is best and truest within you.

The emergence of wholeness and your authentic self can feel threatening. To the degree that the ego is invested in anger or fear-driven agendas, appearances, control, power, division, delusion or rigid belief systems, it will resist letting go into reality and a compassionate, loving response to life. Becoming real, authentic, or whole demands a spirit of receptive, gentle kindliness and a willingness to see all things as they are, beyond all pretense and any willful ignorance. The deep Self is the embodiment of truth and love but fundamentally love. An ego that wishes to benefit from its guidance must be an ego committed to truth and love as its fundamental value. Only then can it align with the deep Self and successfully follow its direction.

Who we are when we have aligned with the deep Self and consequently set aside our pretenses, our self-definitions, our pain driven distortions and culturally imposed belief systems, is a child-like, free, playful, ever evolving, joyful expression of love. The authentic self is not a new, highly refined ego state that replaces our old, dilapidated, broken down ego or egos. It is a way of being that does not take self-definition seriously anymore. In response to the question, "Who are you?" a person living out of the authentic self would say something to the effect: "I don't know who I am, and I am glad for the freedom that gives me. What I do know is that I am a continually unfolding mystery, surprising, and delighting myself every day. I love and welcome everything within me and do my best to honor and care for all of my parts.” Just as the deep Self is not a thing, but flowing energy of knowing love, I will lose my sense of being a separate, defined entity the more my life resonates with the energy of the deep Self.

Occasionally clients will ask the deep Self, “Who are you?”. The answer is almost always the same. “I am you.” The felt division between ego and deep Self is imaginary, although it may seem very real. Even though my ego may be hardened and cold, at my core, I am love.

Moreover, the love that is my essence is an extension of the universal oneness and love that is the foundation of creation. This is not merely a beautiful thought. It is the direct experience of many of my clients, mystics from all ages and cultures, and many who have experienced the ego dissolving effects of psychedelics. Those who have had the opportunity to experience reality beyond the strictures of ego all describe the same fundamental insight. Everything is a oneness, and the only way to describe this experience of oneness is love. Love is the ground of being: the beginning and the end of all things. I am love, and when I lose my connection to love, love reaches out to me, offering to guide me back into harmony with the universal oneness. The internal presence of love is the deep Self. It is who I am, and it is an emanation of the ultimate "I am."

The human experience of love is epitomized in the mother/infant bond. It has five fundamental qualities that David Richo calls the five “A’s.” They are Attention, Acceptance, Appreciation, Affection, and Allowing. In a healthy mother/infant relationship, the mother is fascinated with the baby, paying attention to the child's nature, needs, and wants. All of which she responds to as effectively as possible. A healthy mother accepts the child as it is in all of its uniqueness, even though some aspects of the child might be quite challenging. The good mother finds much about her child that she appreciates, seeing goodness and beauty in the precious life given to her care. She expresses her affection readily. She delights in holding, kissing, and caressing her baby. Finally, a healthy mother allows her child to become its unique self rather than demanding the child become who she thinks he or she ought to be.

The same pattern reactivates when a couple enters into a healthy romantic bond. Mutual attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing flow readily, although in most cases, ego ultimately gets in the way, and love's expression fades. Nevertheless, those who have fallen in love and those who have had the experience of becoming a parent have known the essence of love even if the experience was imperfect or short-lived.

When my clients engage the deep Self through meditation or Active Imagination, they experience the five "A's" welling up from their depth usually personified in the form of an inner teacher or spiritual guide. Repeated encounters with the deep Self tend to transform the ego so that it gradually becomes comfortable accepting love and allowing love to flow through it into every aspect of life. As this happens, self-compassion and universal compassion become fundamental values. Joy, peace and gratitude flow naturally.

Those who allow their egos to be possessed by love have a deep knowing that they are in tune with the fundamental energy of the universe. They know that at its core, the world is benign, and ultimately all is well. This sense of ultimate security allows them to face the suffering inherent in life with equanimity and joy at being allowed to participate in the grand adventure of our human embodiment.

Love’s five “A’s” apply not only to interpersonal relationships but to everything we encounter. Nature, politics, adversity, change, and losses of every kind are all opportunities to express love. Living out of love means you pay attention to whatever you are experiencing; accepting it as it is without pretending otherwise; appreciating whatever opportunity it brings or truth it manifests; letting yourself feel affectionate or tender-hearted to whatever or whoever you encounter as if everyone and everything were precious; and allowing others, nature, and events to freely unfold to the degree that it is safe and prudent.

An ego that is transparent to love will live in a way that is markedly different from the norm. First, those who give priority to love prefer being over doing. Most people lead busy lives either by choice or by necessity. Even when they have some free time, the majority keep their minds occupied with distractions of all kinds: reading, TV, video games, internet, maintaining relationships, gossip, projects, and hobbies. Without active, external stimulation, they feel bored and often anxious, sometimes for good reason. Many struggle to keep inner conflicts, pain, and self-loathing out of awareness by staying busy, distracted or numbed.

Those who live grounded in love gravitate to self-compassion rather than self-loathing. If there are inner conflicts or unresolved, painful psychic wounds, they move toward them with a gentle healing intention much as a mother would toward a child who is suffering. They also know they are part of a greater love that will support and guide them as they face both the inner and outer challenges life inevitably lays before them.

By taking time to be quiet, open, and receptive, those who give precedence to being are allowing psychic space for the deep Self to flow through them. The energy of the deep Self is a constant presence like the water in a house's plumbing. Taking time to just "be" is like opening the faucet. The fuller and more often you do it, the higher the flow becomes. This is especially so if you hold in the back of your mind the intention of being transformed by love. Trying to live lovingly without taking time to "be" will cause a person to manifest effortfully the ego's idea of love. It will tend to be draining and egocentric, although still a far better choice than not trying to love at all. Even dedicating one's life to good causes can become entangled with a controlling and divisive mindset if the person does not spend significant time quietly welcoming the loving energy of the deep Self.

Practicing "being" does not require the mastery of any special skills. We are wired for it. Our bodies already know how. Instead of spending most of our awake hours under the control of the freeze, fight or flight sympathetic nervous system, we can switch gears to the quiet, attentive awareness of the parasympathetic nervous system. There are many ways to do this: being in nature, contemplating beauty, deep slow breathing, meditation, being held, being in the flow, etc. When you add to this the intention of inviting love from your depth, it will flow. You will then reengage the world not by trying to be kind or good or righteous, but by spontaneously and naturally giving love because it has become your nature.

A common, almost universal presumption is that we must make ourselves worthy of earning life's rewards. This is undoubtedly the case in most aspects of life. Hard work and dedication plus a certain amount of luck are the best way to get ahead in life. Success comes from setting high goals and focusing your energy toward them. This certainly appears to work for many, but the success achieved does not often correlate with enhanced levels of joy, peace, or meaning. There will often be some euphoria when the goal is achieved, but the person will soon return to their emotional/spiritual baseline. Whatever was achieved is like giving an old car a new paint job. It looks beautiful and feels good for a while, but it still has the same old clunky engine, transmission, and electrical system.

Real success in the sense of a radically transformed life filled with joy and gratitude is not achievable through ego level actions. It cannot be earned. Nor will it arise out of right thinking, right belief, or right behaviors. They may help the ego be more receptive to the transformative presence of the deep Self, but at best, they only prepare the way. In themselves, they are not the way.

A successful and meaningful life in the sense of the fullest achievement of one's most important potentials cannot be earned, and no one is worthy of it. "Worth" has nothing to do with it. If you inherited a million dollars and it was sitting in your bank account waiting to be used, concerns over worthiness would be moot. It is simply there, yours for the taking. Your task would be to access it and spend it in a way that would bring you the most significant benefit. This is the way of real success. If you welcome and actively allow the energy of the deep Self, love, to flow through you, your gifts will flourish. You will blossom, feel blessed, and become a blessing to all around you. This will be not because of what you did, but because you stopped your busy doing and let something far greater than yourself become the controlling influence in your life. You can't make yourself become what you already are. You can't earn what you already have.

To understand how the psyche works, we must set aside our assumptions about how we know reality. It is the common assumption of our culture that the way you know is through logic and analysis. Through the utilization of words and math, we translate our experience into symbols and then manipulate them to produce clarity. However, what we end up with is not reality, but a model we have created through the utilization of language and math. The realities that matter most are only able to be known and understood through direct, immediate experience. You come to know what is, the truth, not by standing apart from it and creating a map of it, but by stepping into it and being immersed in it.

The immersion in experience creates a sense of oneness between myself and my inner life and the universe. That experience of oneness makes it clear that separating the world into little pieces that I then name and manipulate creates a false sense of reality. Creation is not made up of discrete little pieces. It is an interconnected oneness. It is not a duality or a separated series of entities.

When I ground my life in non-dual consciousness, I have a foundation for understanding why I cannot make myself other than what I already am. That is, I am an aspect of the oneness and the goodness. The beauty of the oneness is already my truth. I may step back from it and pretend it is not so or even convince myself I am separate from it, but that is just a story, an imagined construct. The truth remains. I am a part of the oneness and goodness of ultimate reality. As a part of it, I am it. Thus, I cannot earn what I already have. I cannot make myself become what I already am. **I Am** **That.** My task is not to figure it out by creating a new model, although that can be useful. First and foremost, I must surrender to reality, letting go into the ecstasy of the oneness that longs to embrace me.

Whatever feeds a sense of separation or otherness intensifies our fundamental illusion that we are distinct, disconnected entities, which leads to the lonely, empty, meaningless lives that burden so many. One of the principal drivers of separation is clinging to possessions, relationships, status, plans, etc. Clinging separates us from the flow of life around and within us. The oneness is an unfolding process. When I grasp onto anything, I both fragment my world and lose touch with the flow. Possessions in and of themselves are not a problem. Putting significant energy into trying to keep hold of them or increase them distracts us from choosing love as our highest value and disconnects us from the free-flowing energy of love.

Appreciating that ultimate reality is love radically changes one’s sense of God, prayer, and spirituality. The consensus of those who still believe in God is adapted from an outdated, monarchical social construct that permeated civil society when all the major contemporary religious traditions arose. In this model, God is the all-powerful ruler who must be obeyed. He rewards those who please him and punishes those who do not. His subjects approach him with great deference seeking his favors while showering him with praise. When ultimate reality is understood as uncompromised and unlimited love, the monarch God is replaced by a kindness that permeates everything and only seeks to nurture us to the extent that we allow it. There is no need to seek forgiveness or favors. All we could ever want to find true happiness is already within us and all around us, only wanting to help us. The only prayer that matters is "Yes." If we need a human analog for this vision of God, think of a generous, dedicated mother who believes you are the best thing that ever happened to her. This God is the one you turn to when you are hurting, or when you have made a terrible mistake and are filled with shame. Like the good mother, this God sees you, knows you, knows what you struggle with, and wants nothing more than to help you find the way through. This God wants to share your joys and sorrows, your victories, and defeats. When you screw up, this mother/God welcomes you back with open arms and helps to bind your wounds.

This is a God with whom you can relax and be exactly who you are. You are safe within her arms. The only thing you need to believe in is her love. No creeds or doctrinal edifices are required, just a willingness to be cared about, cared for, encouraged, and supported as you negotiate your life. By allowing yourself to receive this love, you are transformed by it and naturally learn to love as you have been loved.

We become more loving not because we decide we should behave kindlier, although that is a good first step. The real source of genuine, spontaneous, generous love lies far beyond the ego. The ego's task is simply to welcome it and allow it to flow through the ego to the world at large. This leads to a life that is driven by all-encompassing compassion. Socially mandated ethical systems and rules may be helpful guidelines but are always secondary to compassion's imperatives. Those who allow their egos to be possessed by love do not do good works because they should. Their morality is driven by love. They give of themselves because it is the most meaningful, fulfilling, joyful way of being they can imagine.

Most religiously inclined people assume that ethical behavior is a way of earning God's approval and love. The truth is the inverse of this. God's approval and love are already present within. The ego's task is not to earn it but surrender to it and allow its energy to drive the spontaneous expression of loving-kindness. You become your best self because you allow yourself to be an instrument of your deep Self, the divine energy of love within you.

There are several things the ego can do to facilitate its surrender to love. The first is to decide that this is, in fact, its highest priority. This might seem easy enough. Most people would probably affirm that being loving is incredibly important to them. Yet there is usually a wide discrepancy between their good intention and actual choices. This does not mean that the intention is necessarily insincere. Egos are often constrained by blinders, conditioning, and inner conflicts that block, cloud, or distort our ability to love. Nevertheless, the intention to be loving is a necessary first step.

When the intention is clear, honesty with oneself about your wants, needs, intentions, and actual choices is necessary to create sufficient self-awareness that loving choices indeed become possible. This kind of honesty will be severely constrained if shame and self-judgment strongly influence the ego. It will hurt too much to look. You must be able to approach yourself in a spirit of loving self-compassion, refusing to allow shame and self-judgment to color your self-perception. The good news is that self-compassion can be learned, especially if you ask for help from your depth.

An additional condition to letting go into love as your fundamental value is that every other thing we value, reputation, status, possessions, relationships, etc. must be secondary to love and informed by love. The ego must be willing to let go of anything that impairs the expression of love.

A final cost of love that must be willingly borne, if necessary, is that you may find yourself outside the mainstream of your society or family. As your embrace of life and yourself becomes ever more inclusive, you may feel less and less a part of your social milieu. The irony of a love grounded life is that you may feel like a stranger within your own family and culture.

When love finally begins to flow freely, fear falls away. Joy is a constant no matter what external circumstances may be like, and every day is filled with moments of gratitude. You will know with unshakeable clarity that the universe is benign. At the deepest level, all is well. When you know from your inner experience that love is the source of everything, it is obvious that even suffering and death are ultimately part of love and, if accepted, can purify your capacity for love.

Thomas Merton once wrote: "We are already one, but imagine we are not, and what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."

Considering the multiple gifts of a life lived in love, joy, peace, gratitude, authenticity, openness, transparency, and freedom from fear, how could anyone reject it? Yet many do. Even those who acknowledge love's primacy frequently choose otherwise.

Why do we cling to misery when the alternative is so available? Partly, it is due to ignorance, but mostly, it is due to an almost universal illusion. One central illusion lies at the core of our suffering. **We believe that we are our egos** and, as such, are defined as distinct entities only externally connected to other objects and often in competition with them. Under the power of this illusion, we feel fundamentally separate and alone. Even though this leads to an effortful life that is full of struggle and feels empty at its core, it is all that we can see. The illusion is so strong that it is hard even to imagine the love-infused reality that lies beyond it. We are lost not because of ill will but because we have been handed the wrong map and persist in using it. Our vices are the natural consequence of trying to live well within the strictures of the grand illusion. If I am a unique, distinct entity, separate from all others, then self-centeredness, greed, striving for power and control, a willingness to manipulate others, and a lack of caring about the suffering of others all make sense. Clinging to power and possessions is a hallmark of being caught in the illusion. The more tightly we cling, the less likely we are to let go into the open awareness necessary to know reality.

Buddhist teaching uses the image of a mirror as a way of describing an enlightened ego. An unblemished mirror reflects things exactly as they are. An enlightened or healthy ego is strongly committed to an undistorted awareness of reality. It wants to know things, whether internal or external, as they are without preconceptions, prejudice, or distortion. It foregoes the comfort of dogma, cultural assumptions, or belief systems in favor of the surprise and wonder of direct experience and the unfolding mystery of the deep Self and creation.

Also, like a mirror, the enlightened ego does not cling to any moment or image. As life unfolds, the mirror does not freeze and hold onto any particular moment. It allows each scenario to pass through without interference. It is with whatever "is" now. These two themes, commitment to reality and letting go into the "now," are essential for an ego to be fully open to love, both to receive love and to give love.

We are biologically wired for love. When there is a healthy bond between the mother (or primary caregiver) and an infant, both mother and baby experience love in one of its purest, most primal expressions. Childbirth, nursing, or even just being fascinated by how cute the baby is, stimulates the flow of Oxytocin, the love hormone. This, in turn, drives the mother to bond with her baby. As she does, the reward neurotransmitter, Dopamine, is released, causing feelings of joy or euphoria.

Bonding involves the five elements of love we discussed previously: attention, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and allowing. When a mother bonds with her baby she pays attention to it, is fascinated with it, and alert to fulfilling its needs and providing comfort. She appreciates her baby. She delights in her baby just as it is. She is grateful for the opportunity to have been given such a precious gift. She is drawn to touch, kiss, play mirroring games, sing and talk with her baby and maintain a high level of physical closeness. As she comes to know the child in depth, she will seek to find ways to encourage and support the emergence of the child's unique personality and talents.

The mother, who is offering this emotional foundation to her child and the baby who is receiving it, are both experiencing love in its most natural, organic human expression. The creation of this foundational, life-giving, loving bond is the result of a combination of neurochemistry and ability on the part of the mother to willingly embrace and allow herself to go with the flow of her instinctual drive to bond. When she does, there will be a deep abiding joy undergirding both her life and her baby's life. When the bond is strong and enduring, life has meaning that goes beyond any philosophical or religious belief system, and gratitude comes easily.

The mother (or primary caregiver) bond is the relationship that is the principal catalyst for the development of a newborn's capacity for empathy. If it is healthy, the child's fundamental approach to life is grounded in the sense of connection, trust, caring, and an inclination to compassion. The ability to form loving relationships will come easily and be that child's primary source of meaning and joy throughout life. If the attachment between mother and infant is significantly disrupted a cascade of psychological, neurological, and physical deficits will ensue. An infant who has not experienced reliable maternal affection will not only feel unloved but unlovable, which will lead to a life of isolation and a proclivity to shame. The parts of the brain that connect feelings of satisfaction and pleasure with human intimacy, the Oxytocin/Dopamine axis, will be stunted due to the lack of early stimulation. Because of this, these children in adulthood will be more inclined to seek pleasure in the transient satisfaction from possessing things, power, and drugs than in human connection. It is difficult for them to feel a bond and its consequent enduring joy with anyone.

Another consequence of disrupted attachment with the mother is that the child and eventual adult will be predisposed to multiple psychological and health problems. When a fundamental need is threatened or unmet, the universal response is to feel stressed. At the emotional level, that means that our fight, flight, or freeze reactions are triggered. If this happens periodically for short periods, it does no harm. However, when an infant is in a constant state of arousal because it is starving for intimacy, significant damage is done to the body and psyche. Depending upon a child's personality and cultural influences, children suffering from disordered attachment will live lives colored by some mixture of anger, fear, or passive resignation, i.e., emotional dysregulation and reactivity, anxiety, and depression. Moreover, their general health will be adversely affected. Chronic stress dramatically increases the likelihood of stroke, heart disease, some cancers, diabetes, and infectious diseases.

While Americans celebrate that we are the wealthiest nation in the world, we do not realize that we are impoverished in what matters. Our embrace of largely unfettered capitalism, competitive striving, and rugged individualism has relegated the values that lead to bonding to a minor role in the culture. We agree that these values may be OK at home but not in the marketplace or even the community at large. Greed for power or money drives our major institutions, and empathy is identified with weakness. Thus, we have a highly stressed, dysfunctional society distorted by racism, extreme income inequality, little or no systematic support for mothers and young children, widespread poverty, and addiction. Our ability to support one another is crippled by tribalism with its us versus them mentality. The isolating perspective of tribalism is compounded by a dependence upon transactional relationships in which you only give because you anticipate equivalent or better return, rather than relationships built on mutual care and regard. Our culture both encourages disordered attachment and exacerbates its consequences.

We are quick to fall into fear and anger, driven by the us versus them mentality. We put our energy into striving for status and stuff rather than nurturing friendships. Since most relationships are transactional and thus manipulative, we are continually on guard against being taken advantage of. Trust is low. Insecurity is high. Loneliness abounds.

This is not a natural situation for those who began their lives grounded in a secure bond with their mother. The dissonance between these early formative experiences and the world we now live in could lead them to seek, at least somewhat, a more empathic culture that reflects the love and generosity they depended upon in their first years of life. However, this inclination toward supporting a more empathic civilization is often derailed. Willingness to trust and bond can be hijacked by culturally sanctioned tribalism. People will often relate empathically to those they consider part of their group but refuse to offer the same consideration to outsiders. Moreover, because affiliation with their group is vital to them, they are subject to groupthink and are often unwilling or unable to relinquish their group's divisive prejudices. If they want to experience the full potential of a deeply meaningful life, they must find the courage to reconsider their group assumptions and drop their tribal boundaries. Then they will be free to approach everyone with empathy and compassion.

Those who did not have the blessing of a secure maternal bond will be inclined to accept the culture as “just the way life is.” They have little reason to hope that anything could be otherwise. They will tend to accept a non-empathic lifestyle and get what solace they can from shiny new things and addictions of all kinds, while they studiously ignore their internal pain and are indifferent to the suffering all around them.

Because empathy is difficult for them, they do not bond deeply and tend to be loners. They do not identify strongly with any group and are less influenced than most by group assumptions or prejudices. The intellectual freedom this gives them may help them see more clearly the inequities and irrational practices of their culture, but it does not help them feel the suffering of others or care about them in any personal way. Their passion, if any, will be directed more against the stupidity of the mob than for the pain of the victims. Even when they express concern for the suffering of others, it is more abstract as lovers of humankind who do not care much about individuals.

Their path to a life grounded in love and thus a meaningful and joyful life is quite challenging. If the ability to experience and express empathy and love is not adequately stimulated during the first years of life, and especially in the early months, it will be forever impaired. The damage can be mitigated, but only under certain circumstances. Most importantly, a person must realize that there is a problem. The emptiness and loneliness that burdens his or her life must be acknowledged, and a commitment must be made to remedy it as much as possible. The first step in the remedy is radical honesty. You must tell yourself the truth about the failure of all the various comforts and distractions you have depended upon to fill your emptiness and protect you from pain. You must also realize that love is the only thing that will bring meaning and fulfillment. This realization may arise from intuitive knowing or a transformative external experience such as a major loss or a significant health crisis. However it occurs, it must be strong enough to shock the ego into initiating a systematic, long term, committed practice of reawakening and slowly strengthening the neurological substrate for bonding that was never properly developed during the original sensitive period in infancy and early childhood.

Like muscles weakened from childhood polio, there will be some degree of permanent impairment, but also significant room for repair. Physical therapy and a program of strengthening exercises can restore varying degrees of mobility depending upon the degree of damage done. There is a parallel process for awakening the capacity for love and empathy.

First, choose to be kind and respectful in every interaction both to other people and all sentient beings. Secondly, go out of your way to nurture any relationship in which you feel even a slight bond. Risk trusting others even though it feels risky, and you know that you will occasionally be taken advantage of. If you are in a romantic relationship, celebrate the passion and joy it brings, even though it may fade all too quickly. Romantic bonding energizes the same neurological systems that bond mother and infant and lay the foundations for human loving. Make it a personal project to be the best romantic partner you can be. Know that your ability to feel affection will grow if you nurture it. Do your best to keep stress in your life to a minimum since it is such a potent, disconnecting energy. Also, get acquainted with your deep Self. This is not difficult. It only takes time, willingness, and a little guidance. The most powerful path for encountering the deep Self is Active Imagination. You can go to my website for more information and an audio file to help you make this connection. ([www.deanschlect.com](http://www.deanschlect.com)) Journaling and periods of quiet contemplative awareness and prayer are common ways of engaging this divine dimension within you. Time spent with the deep Self is profoundly healing since the deep Self is love and wisdom personified. The more you let yourself become connected to it and ultimately one with it, the more you will become love.

All of the above practices would be valuable for anyone. Still, for those who did not begin their lives grounded in a healthy maternal bond, these practices are essential if they would ever hope to love and thus experience the vitality, meaning, and joy that should have been their birthright. Depending upon individual personality characteristics and how badly disrupted the original attachment process may have been, there may be some ultimate limitations to the individual’s ability to feel connection. Moreover, the person may always be a bit awkward or hesitant in the expression of affection. Nevertheless, love can still be your core value. Your life can still be full and meaningful and a blessing to all who know you. A repaired, broken vessel will have its limitations, but it can still be beautiful and serve well its original purpose.

Guidelines for Love

1. Stay as close to reality as possible:

We cannot fully know things or other people as they are. We can only know the limited version offered to us by our senses which is then further constrained by our cognitive filters, preconceived assumptions and the consensual reality provided by our culture. Loving another person or any entity implies that we are actually focused on who or what that other is. To the degree that we miss the mark we are only loving a product of our own imaginations. Since it is inevitable that our perceptions will always be somewhat distorted, loving requires the humility to acknowledge this limitation and consequently maintain a spirit of open, receptive curiosity.

1. Accept and practice the five basic elements of love:

These are, Attention, Acceptance, Appreciation, Affection and   
Allowing. There are typical ways we block ourselves in practicing each of these elements.

We don’t pay **attention** to the other because we are busy, preoccupied, don’t care or make assumptions rather than really looking, asking and listening. Instead of approaching the other in a spirit of compassionate curiosity and sincerely inquiring about their status, we presume we already know.

We don’t **accept** the other because of judgement due to negative projection, belief systems, or seeing only the surface instead of the deeper more complex reality of the other.

We don’t **appreciate** the other because we don’t respect or are insensitive to their inherent value and beauty. Partly, this may be because our own sense of values is distorted or we are unable to see beneath their outer, ego level attitudes and distortions that obscure a deeper, inner beauty.

We withhold showing **affection** because we ourselves were starved for affection growing up, or we are driven by a need for control or fear our feelings of love will not be appreciated or reciprocated.

We resist **allowing** other people and life itself to unfold according to its own rhythms. Although it is natural and appropriate to encourage others to become their best selves and to interact with the world is such a way that it truly serves the common good, there is a limit to what we can achieve. When this happens, we will be inclined to gravitate toward a reactive spirit of resistance which leaves us disconnected, fearful and angry.

1. Nurture a lifestyle grounded in receptive consciousness. We possess two fundamental styles of consciousness, one driven by the sympathetic nervous system and the other by the parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is focused on fight, flight or freeze. It is designed to protect us from threat and sees external reality as something to be controlled. It is, therefore, an instrumental form of consciousness. In our culture instrumental consciousness is the predominant form of consciousness and leads to an empty and largely meaningless life. In contrast the parasympathetic nervous system triggers a state of relaxed openness in which boundaries and distinctions fade and a sense of oneness predominates. It is a receptive form of consciousness that gives rise to a sense of connection and intimacy. It supports physical, mental and spiritual health and is the source of a full, meaningful life. Love flows naturally when you are in a state of receptive consciousness. In instrumental consciousness, the best you can do is to try to act lovingly.
2. Regularly check in with yourself to see whether your state of mind is being driven by the sympathetic or parasympathetic nervous system. If you notice yourself feeling fearful or angry do what you can to deal with the cause and then let it go. Recognize your fear or need to control. Allow yourself to feel it. Investigate what is triggering it and nurture that agitated part of yourself with tender caring. Then intentionally switch to the parasympathetic nervous system. This is easy to do by just practicing slow deep breathing for a couple of minutes. If after two or three attempts, the fear or anger persist write about it or talk it out with a friend or counselor. If you allow yourself to stay in a defensive or aggressive state of mind, you are ruining your life, despite whatever good intentions you may have.
3. A fundamental Christian insight is that our lives should be grounded in the three theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Love. Faith means that we trust we are cared about and cared for by Ultimate Reality or God whose fundamental energy is love. Hope means that we understand that the direction of the evolution of humanity as well as our own lives is toward ever-increasing light, peace and joy despite all of the inevitable setbacks we have to deal with. If we can live in Faith and Hope we will live primarily out of parasympathetic consciousness and will grow steadily in our capacity for love.