

Love, Gratitude and Forgiveness

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A relationship can nourish us, but it cannot become the substitute for personal identity. Love is our emotional response what we perceive as irreplaceable. Love contributes to well-being and the growth of both parties. Love transcends mere calculations of quid pro quo, as no one is born simply to satisfy our desires.

One of the characteristics of mature love is the knowledge that we can love our partner deeply and that, nonetheless, we may know moments of anger, boredom, and distance. In mature love, we conserve the ability to see the entire canvas and not just the last stroke (Carmody, 1988; Timmreck, 1990). Every relationship is a system, and when a member changes the other member must also change otherwise the system's homeostatic equilibrium is lost. Romantic love is not enough. Love alone does not guarantee happiness, because it does not assure maturity and wisdom, it does not impart the ability to communicate well, or the art of integrating love with one's individual life. Love does not produce self-esteem but it can strengthen it, and love without self-esteem can scarcely survive (Murray, Griffin, & Holmes, 1996).

Every human being seeks to be loved. Animals, as for example monkeys according to research by Harry Harlow (1997), also exhibit this preference: they prefer to renounce food in order to receive affection, warmth and emotional gratification (Harlow & Zimmermann, 1996). Our social instinct only exalts such tendency toward love. Therefore, when we are incapable to give and to receive love in a healthy and authentic way, we may settle even for negative consideration. Often, in the absence of true love, life is lived in relationships in which one is misunderstood, ridiculed, despised, and violated, sometimes physically and, in any case,

emotionally (Basile, Arias, Desai, & Thompson, 2004). “He does it for my own good, because he loves me,” is the justification that often is heard from people who live in this type of abusive relationships (Copenhaver, Lash, & Eisler, 2000; Hayes, Beevers, Feldman, Laurenceau, & Perlman, 2005).

As social beings, we seek to find the optimal distance from others in a healthy equilibrium between autonomy and dependency (Haslam, Bain, & Neal, 2004). This distance can vary from person to person and even within the same individual over time. The person feels free to decide who may be a good partner in that specific moment of life. In mature love, the individual decides from whom, if, when and what to give and to receive (Montgomery, 2005).

The English word love derives from the Sanskrit word “lobha” which originally meant greed (Vatte, 1998). Once sublimated, this greed is transformed in what we understand as love. Unprocessed greed tends to engender possessiveness; love shares and gives without asking anything in return (Krishnaswamy, 2004; Narayan, 2000). A process of growth allows us to move from greed to love. To be able to give we must have something to offer, but, sometimes little is available to give. What one may be able to give another stems from the love of self. Love of self means self-respect, the ability not to judge ourselves too harshly, and refraining from hurting ourselves. Love of self implies a deep respect for our emotions (Rauer & Volling, 2005).

Within the framework of positive psychology, to be satisfied and happy with oneself is fundamental for being able to be altruists (Seligman, 2002). To have something within oneself that can be given to another, such as joy, happiness, love that overflows is a natural progression of personal growth. It is energy that, in a completely natural way, can flow from us towards others (Diener & Seligman, 2006). If, on the contrary, we are unhappy and dissatisfied, any

altruism that we may show would not be authentic; it would be a way not to think about ourselves, a duty, a formality, or a sacrifice.

Often an incorrect understanding of mature love rules our action. It may be perceived as a quasi physical need; it may be an attempt to replenishing a deficiency; it may be as primordial as the baby who needs a parental figure to satisfy its most basic necessities, without which it could not survive (Dieser, 2005). On the contrary, authentic love is an unconditional gift, available in abundance; it is a possession that exists within oneself in such quantity that it may be spontaneously and unreservedly shared. In any case, a person who has so much to offer is truly alive and happy even in those moments when there isn't anyone to share it with. Authentic love is like a flower in a forest: it is there, it exists, it shines with or without someone there who can admire it. The acknowledgment by another is welcomed, but not absolutely necessary. The mere flow of life and the joy of love is what can fulfill and make the loving person happy (Seligman, 2003).

Optimists and pessimists differ in the way in which they explain positive or negative events, and thus may differ in their way to express and receive love (Carver & Scheier, 2002). The optimistic explanatory style protects against depression, is associated with better health and promotes greater success in life. The pessimist feels impotent, desists before difficulties, and is at greater risk for depression. Ideally, a flexible optimism that protects the individual from losing sight of reality and of one's own responsibilities coexists with a healthy understanding of the positive power of love (Argyle, 2001).

Gratitude acknowledges what others may contribute to our life and encourages us to support positive human accomplishment. Success comes more easily when we are grateful for what we have been given, since such appreciation inspires us to make use of our resources to the

fullest and it inspires others to go out of their way to help us. Our own happiness can be augmented through gratitude (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004). At the University of California, psychologist Robert Emmons has uncovered that the practice of gratitude can improve well-being, increase the levels of energy, and may also promote recovery from illness.

To be generous and altruistic towards others it is a powerful way to feel better about ourselves. Visiting someone in a hospital, helping a friend in difficulty, writing a letter to a relative whom we have not heard from for some time, or offering to help someone with a chore are all actions that can boost our well-being. To do good increases our self-esteem and reduces our tendency toward isolation, sadness and depression. When an altruistic action is performed, it distracts us from our own existence and it gives meaning and a wider scope to our life because what we do matters in the eyes of others (Luthans, 2002).

Forgiveness lets us put the past in its place and frees us to move on with our life (Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman, Michael, Rasmussen, Billings, Heinze, Neufeld, Shorey, Roberts, & Roberts, 2005). Forgiving does not mean that we condone bad decisions or inappropriate behavior. But if we respond to such negative behaviors toward us by holding onto anger, hurt, or resentment, we tie ourselves to negativity (Corlett, 2006; Ingersoll-Dayton & Krause, 2005). All human beings learn through observation and imitation, but also by making mistakes and asking seemingly elementary questions. Developing an understanding of the way people learn and grow in their own ways may help the process of forgiveness (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006), and may help in reducing social loneliness (Day & Maltby, 2005) and in improving family functioning (Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005).

Multicultural and gender-based perspectives can raise valuable questions about positive psychology and the relationship between cultural particularity and virtues such as forgiveness

(Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Wade, Bailey, & Shaffer, 2005). Sandage, Hill & Vang (2003) have explored the culturally embedded nature of forgiveness as a virtue and illustrated the value of an indigenous psychology approach by describing some of the dynamics related to conflict resolution and forgiveness in traditional cultures. Malcolm & Ramsey (2006) have outlined a range of theological, psychological, and socio-cultural perspectives to cultivating the practical wisdom needed for forgiveness. Harris, Luskin, Norman, & Standard (2006) have experimentally shown that forgiveness may reduce negative feelings about a perceived offense 2 to 3 times more effectively than the control condition, and that it produced a significant increase in positive thoughts and feelings toward the offender. Significant correlations were also found for forgiveness and self-efficacy, forgiveness generalized to new situations, situational stress, and anger. In a study about infidelity and its outcomes, Hall & Fincham (2006) show that forgiveness fully mediates the association between attributions and relationship termination and their findings are confirmed by other studies (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005; Tsang et al., 2006).

A corollary to forgiveness is compassion. Compassion is born out of awareness that suffering is part of the human experience (Gragmolati & Stupak, 2002). The most effective leaders are capable of leading with compassion (Gunn, 2002). Acting compassionately is not the same as covering for others who are not pulling their weight. We can be tough-minded about a problem and still be warmhearted toward those who are causing the problem.

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