

Absolute and Relative Love

by John Welwood

Love is what we long to receive and to give, yet our intimate relationships are conflicted and often painful. Psychologist John Welwood looks at the difference between absolute and relative love, and the wound within each of us that no other can heal.

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Again and again it defeats me—
This reliance on others for bliss.

—from a poem by the author

While most of us have moments of loving freely and openly, it is often hard to sustain such love where it matters most—in our intimate relationships. This creates a strange gap between absolute love—the perfect love we can know in our heart—and relative love, the imperfect ways it is embodied in our relationships. Why, if love is so great and powerful, are human relationships so challenging and difficult? If love is the source of happiness and joy, why is it so hard to open to it fully?

What lies at the root of every relationship problem is a core “wound of the heart” that affects not only our personal relations, but the quality of life in our world as a whole. This wounding shows up as a pervasive mood of unlove, a deep sense that we are not intrinsically lovable just as we are. We experience ourselves as separated from love, and this shuts down our capacity to trust. So even though we may hunger for love or believe in love, we still have difficulty opening to it and letting it circulate freely through us.

Absolute Love

If the pure essence of love is like the sun in a cloudless sky, this clear and luminous light shines through relationships most brightly in beginnings and endings. When your baby is first born, you feel so graced by the arrival of such an adorable being that you respond to it totally, without reserve, demand, or judgment. Or when you first fall in love, you are so surprised and delighted by the sheer beauty of this person’s presence that it blows your heart wide open. For a while the

bright sunlight of all-embracing love pours through full strength, and you may melt into bliss.

Similarly, when a friend or loved one is dying, all your quibbles with that person fall away. You simply appreciate the other for who he or she is, just for having been here with you in this world for a little while. Pure, unconditional love shines through when people put themselves—their own demands and agendas—aside and completely open to one another.

Absolute love is not something that we have to—or that we even can—concoct or fabricate. It is what comes through us naturally when we fully open up—to another person, to ourselves, or to life. In relation to another, it manifests as selfless caring. In relation to ourselves, it shows up as inner confidence and self-acceptance that warms us from within. And in relation to life, it manifests as a sense of well-being, appreciation, and *joie de vivre*.

When we experience this kind of openness and warmth coming from another, it provides essential nourishment: it helps us experience our own warmth and openness, allowing us to recognize the beauty and goodness at the core of our nature. The light of unconditional love awakens the dormant seed potentials within us, helping them ripen, blossom, and bear fruit, allowing us to bring forth the unique gifts that are ours to offer in this life. Receiving pure love, caring, and recognition from another confers a great blessing: it affirms us in being who we are, allowing us to say yes to ourselves.

What feels most affirming is not just to feel loved but to feel loved as we are. As we are means in our very being. Absolute love is the love of being.

Deeper than all our personality traits, pain, or confusion, our being is the dynamic, open presence that we essentially are. It is what we experience when we feel settled, grounded, and connected with ourselves. When rooted in this basic ground of presence, love flows freely through us, and we can more readily open up to others. When two people meet in this quality of open presence, they share a perfect moment of absolute love.

However—and this is an essential point—the human personality is not the source of absolute love. Rather, its light shines through us, from what lies altogether beyond us, the ultimate source of all. We are the channels through which this radiance flows. Yet in flowing through us,

it also finds a home within us, taking up residence as our heart-essence.

We have a natural affinity for this perfect food that is also our deepest essence, our life's blood. That is why every baby instinctively reaches out for it from the moment of birth. We cannot help wanting our own nature. When the value and beauty of our existence is recognized, this allows us to relax, let down, and settle into ourselves. In relaxing, we open. And this opening makes us transparent to the life flowing through us, like a fresh breeze that enters a room as soon as the windows are raised.

This is the one of the great gifts of human love, this entry it provides into something even greater than human relatedness. In helping us connect with the radiant aliveness within us, it reveals our essential beauty and power, where we are one with life itself because we are fully transparent to life. When life belongs to you and you belong to life, this sets you free from hunger and fear. You experience the essential dignity and nobility of your existence, which does not depend on anyone else's approval or validation. In this deep sense of union with life, you realize you are not wounded, have never been wounded, and cannot be wounded.

This is the bottom line of human existence: Absolute love helps us connect with who we really are. That is why it is indispensable.

Relative Love

Yet even though the human heart is a channel through which great love streams into this world, this heart channel is usually clogged with debris—fearful, defensive patterns that have developed out of not knowing we are truly loved. As a result, love's natural openness, which we can taste in brief, blissful moments of pure connection with another person, rarely permeates our relationships completely. Indeed, the more two people open to each other, the more this wide-openness also brings to the surface all the obstacles to it: their deepest, darkest wounds, their desperation and mistrust, and their rawest emotional trigger-points. Just as the sun's warmth causes clouds to arise, by prompting the earth to release its moisture, so love's pure openness activates the thick clouds of our emotional wounding, the tight places where we are shut down, where we live in fear and resist love.

There is good reason why this happens: Before we can become a clear channel through which love can freely flow, the ways we are wounded must come to the surface and be exposed. Love as a healing power

can operate only on what presents itself to be healed. As long as our wounding remains hidden, it can only fester.

This, then, is relative love: the sunlight of absolute love as it becomes filtered through the clouds of our conditioned personality and its defensive patterns—fearfulness, distrust, reactivity, dishonesty, aggression, and distorted perception. Like a partly cloudy sky, relative love is incomplete, inconstant, and imperfect. It is a continual play of light and shadow. The full radiance of absolute love can only sparkle through in fleeting moments.

If you observe yourself closely in relationships, you will see that you continually move back and forth between being open and closed, clear skies and dark clouds. When another person is responsive, listens well, or says something pleasing, something in you naturally starts to open. But when the other is not responsive, can't hear you, or says something threatening, you may quickly tense up and start to contract.

Our ability to feel a wholehearted yes toward another person fluctuates with the changing circumstances of each moment. It depends on how much each of us is capable of giving and receiving, the chemistry between us, our limitations and conditioned patterns, how far along we are in our personal development, how much awareness and flexibility we each have, how well we communicate, the situation we find ourselves in, and even how well we have each slept the night before. Relative means dependent on time and circumstance.

Ordinary human love is always relative, never consistently absolute. Like the weather, relative love is in continual dynamic flux. It is forever rising and subsiding, waxing and waning, changing shape and intensity.

So far all of this may seem totally obvious. Yet here's the rub: We imagine that others—surely someone out there!—should be a source of perfect love by consistently loving us in just the right way. Since our first experiences of love usually happen in relation to other people, we naturally come to regard relationship as its main source. Then when relationships fail to deliver the ideal love we dream of, we imagine something has gone seriously wrong. And this disappointed hope keeps reactivating the wound of the heart and generating grievance against others. This is why the first step in healing the wound and

freeing ourselves from grievance is to appreciate the important difference between absolute and relative love.

Relationships continually oscillate between two people finding common ground and then having that ground slip out from under them as their differences pull them in different directions. This is a problem only when we expect it to be otherwise, when we imagine that love should manifest as a steady state. That kind of expectation prevents us from appreciating the special gift that relative love does have to offer: personal intimacy. Intimacy—the sharing of who we are in our distinctness—can happen only when my partner and I meet as two, when I appreciate the ways she is wholly other, and yet not entirely other at the same time.

If we look honestly at our lives, most likely we will see that no one has ever been there for us in a totally reliable, continuous way. Though we might like to imagine that somebody, somewhere—maybe movie stars or spiritual people—has an ideal relationship, this is mostly the stuff of fantasy. Looking more closely, we can see that everyone has his or her own fears, blind spots, hidden agendas, insecurities, aggressive and manipulative tendencies, and emotional trigger-points—which block the channels through which great love can freely flow. Much as we might want to love with a pure heart, our limitations inevitably cause our love to fluctuate and waver.

Yet our yearning for perfect love and perfect union does have its place and its own beauty. Arising out of an intuitive knowing of the perfection that lies within the heart, it points toward something beyond what ordinary mortals can usually provide. We yearn to heal our separation from life, from God, from our own heart. When understood correctly, this longing can inspire us to reach beyond ourselves, give ourselves wholeheartedly, or turn toward the life of the spirit. It is a key, as we shall see, that opens the doorway through which absolute love can enter fully into us.

We invariably fall into trouble, however, when we transfer this longing onto another person. That is why it's important to distinguish between absolute and relative love—so we don't go around seeking perfect love from imperfect situations. Although intimate connections can provide dazzling flashes of absolute oneness, we simply cannot count on them for that. The only reliable source of perfect love is that which is perfect—the open, awake heart at the core of being. This alone allows us to know perfect union, where all belongs to us because we belong

to all. Expecting this from relationships only sets us up to feel betrayed, disheartened, or aggrieved.

The Genesis of the Wound

Riding the waves of relationship becomes particularly difficult when the troughs of misunderstanding, disharmony, or separation reactivate our core wound, bringing up old frustration and hurt from childhood. In the first few months of our life, our parents most likely gave us the largest dose of unconditional love and devotion they were capable of. We were so adorable as babies; they probably felt blessed to have such a precious, lovely being come into their lives. We probably had some initial experiences of basking in love's pure, unfiltered sunshine. Yet this also gives rise to one of the most fundamental of all human illusions: that the source of happiness and well-being lies outside us, in other people's acceptance, approval, or caring. As a child, this was indeed the case, since we were at first so entirely dependent on others for our very life. But even if at the deepest level our parents did love us unconditionally, it was impossible for them to express this consistently, given their human limitations. This was not their fault. It doesn't mean they were bad parents or bad people. Like everyone, they had their share of fears, worries, cares, and burdens, as well as their own wounding around love. Like all of us, they were imperfect vessels for perfect love.

When children experience love as conditional or unreliable or manipulative, this causes a knot of fear to form in the heart, for they can only conclude, "I am not truly loved." This creates a state of panic or "freak-out" that causes the body and mind to freeze up. This basic love trauma is known as "narcissistic injury" in the language of psychotherapy, because it damages our sense of self and our ability to feel good about ourselves. It affects our whole sense of who we are by causing us to doubt whether our nature is lovable. As Emily Dickenson describes this universal wound in one of her poems: "There is a pain so utter, it swallows Being up."

This wounding hurts so much that children try to push it out of consciousness. Eventually a psychic scab forms. That scab is our grievance. Grievance against others serves a defensive function, by hardening us so we don't have to experience the underlying pain of not feeling fully loved. And so we grow up with an isolated, disconnected ego, at the core of which is a central wound, freak-out, and shutdown. And all of this is covered over with resentment, which becomes a major weapon in our defense arsenal.

What keeps the wound from healing is not knowing that we are lovely and lovable just as we are, while imagining that other people hold the key to this. We would like, and often expect, relative human love to be absolute, providing a reliable, steady flow of attunement, unconditional acceptance, and understanding. When this doesn't happen, we take it personally, regarding this as someone's fault—our own, for not being good enough, or others', for not loving us enough. But the imperfect way our parents—or anyone else—loved us has nothing to do with whether love is trustworthy or whether we are lovable. It doesn't have the slightest bearing on who we really are. It is simply a sign of ordinary human limitation, and nothing more. Other people cannot love us any more purely than their character structure allows.

Searching for the Source of Love

Fortunately, the storminess of our relationships in no way diminishes or undermines the unwavering presence of great love, absolute love, which is ever present in the background. Even when the sky is filled with thick, dark clouds, the sun never stops shining.

The problems in relationships begin when we imagine that the warmth ignited in our heart isn't really ours, that it's transferred into us by the other person. Then we become obsessed with the other as the provider of love, when in truth the warmth we feel comes from the sunlight of great love entering our heart.

"Those who go on a search for love," D. H. Lawrence writes, "find only their own lovelessness." Here is a simple way to experience for yourself what Lawrence means. Fix your attention on someone you'd like to love you more, and notice how it feels to want that. If you observe this carefully, you will notice that looking to another for love creates a certain tension or congestion in your body, most noticeably in the chest. It constricts the heart. And as a result you feel your own lovelessness.

Imagining others to be the source of love condemns us to wander lost in the desert of hurt, abandonment, and betrayal, where human relationship appears to be hopelessly tragic and flawed. As long as we fixate on what our parents didn't give us, the ways our friends don't consistently show up for us, or the ways our lover doesn't understand us, we will never become rooted in ourselves and heal the wound of the heart. To grow beyond the dependency of a child requires sinking

our own taproot into the wellspring of great love. This is the only way to know for certain that we are loved unconditionally.

In emphasizing the importance of not looking to others for perfect love, I am not suggesting that you turn away from relationships or belittle their importance. On the contrary, learning to sink your taproot into the source of love allows you to connect with others in a more powerful way—"straight up," confidently rooted in your own ground, rather than leaning over, always trying to get something from "out there." The less you demand total fulfillment from relationships, the more you can appreciate them for the beautiful tapestries they are, in which absolute and relative, perfect and imperfect, infinite and finite are marvelously interwoven. You can stop fighting the shifting tides of relative love and learn to ride them instead. And you come to appreciate more fully the simple, ordinary heroism involved in opening to another person and forging real intimacy.

Loving Our Humanness

Although perhaps only saints and buddhas embody absolute love completely, every moment of working with the challenges of relative human love brings a hint of this divine possibility into our life. As the child of heaven and earth, you are a mix of infinite openness and finite limitation. This means that you are both wonderful and difficult at the same time. You are flawed, you are stuck in old patterns, you become carried away with yourself. Indeed, you are quite impossible in many ways. And still, you are beautiful beyond measure. For the core of what you are is fashioned out of love, that potent blend of openness, warmth, and clear, transparent presence. Boundless love always manages somehow to sparkle through your limited form.

Bringing absolute love into human form involves learning to hold the impossibility of ourselves and others in the way that the sky holds clouds—with gentle spaciousness and equanimity. The sky can do this because its openness is so much vaster than the clouds that it doesn't find them the least bit threatening. Holding our imperfections in this way allows us to see them as trail markers of the work-in-progress that we are, rather than as impediments to love or happiness. Then we can say, "Yes, everyone has relative weaknesses that cause suffering, yet everyone also possesses absolute beauty, which far surpasses these limitations. Let us melt down the frozen, fearful places by holding them in the warmth of tenderness and mercy." In his book *Works of Love*, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard points out that true love doesn't embrace others in spite of their flaws, as if rising

above them. Rather, it finds “the other lovable in spite of and together with his weaknesses and errors and imperfections.... Because of your beloved’s weakness you shall not remove yourself from him or make your relationship more remote; on the contrary, the two of you shall hold together with greater solidarity and inwardness in order to remove the weakness.”

The same holds true for loving yourself. When you recognize that the absolute beauty within you cannot be tarnished by your flaws, then this beauty you are can begin to care for the beast you sometimes seem to be. Beauty’s touch begins to soften the beast’s gnarly defenses.

Then you begin to discover that the beast and the beauty go hand in hand. The beast is, in fact, nothing other than your wounded beauty. It is the beauty that has lost faith in itself because it has never been fully recognized. Not trusting that you are loved or lovable has given rise to all the most beastly emotional reactions—anger, arrogance, hatred, jealousy, meanness, depression, insecurity, greedy attachment, fear of loss and abandonment.

The first step in freeing the beast from its burden is to acknowledge the hardening around our heart. Then, peering behind this barrier, we may encounter the wounded, cut-off place in ourselves where the mood of unlove resides. If we can meet this place gently, without judgment or rejection, we will uncover the great tenderness that resides at the very core of our humanness.

Our beauty and our beast both arise from one and the same tenderness. When we harden against it, the beast is born. Yet when we allow the tenderness, we begin to discern the contours of a long-lost beauty hidden within the belly of the beast. If we can shine warmth and openness into the dark, tender place where we don’t know we’re lovable, this starts to forge a marriage between our beauty and our wounded beast.

This is, after all, the love we most long for—this embracing of our humanness, which lets us appreciate ourselves as the beautiful, luminous beings we are, housed in a vulnerable, flickering form whose endless calling is to move from chrysalis to butterfly, from seed to new birth. As earthly creatures continually subject to relative disappointment, pain, and loss, we cannot avoid feeling vulnerable. Yet as an open channel through which great love enters this world, the human heart remains invincible. Being wholly and genuinely human

means standing firmly planted in both dimensions, celebrating that we are both vulnerable and indestructible at the same time.

Here at this crossroads where yes and no, limitless love and human limitation intersect, we discover the essential human calling: progressively unveiling the sun in our heart, that it may embrace the whole of ourselves and the whole of creation within the sphere of its radiant warmth. This love is not the least bit separate from true power. For, as the great Sufi poet Rumi sings:

When we have surrendered totally to that beauty,
Then we shall be a mighty kindness.

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