

## ***Is Love Enough?***

*Author and teacher John Welwood talks about the challenges of finding and keeping a relationship in this age of anxiety*

### **Interview By Keith Thompson**

John Welwood was ready to step outside the box. The year was 1974. He'd just gotten his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Chicago, having written a doctorate with the bold title, "A New Approach to the Unconscious." Keenly interested in the interface between psychology and spirituality, Welwood set out to investigate for himself the contemplation practices of the world, especially Buddhism.

Meditation: he started doing a lot of it. When he was done with that, he did a lot more. That's the out of the box part. Sitting quietly and doing nothing was not exactly the recommended career venue for a promising young academic who had graduated with honors, and who could have unapologetically joined his profession's rush to reduce the complexities of human nature to nothing-but-neurons. But Welwood was aware of a substantial body of evidence from the East (closer to Burma than Baltimore) suggesting that there are levels, lines, states, and stages of human development beyond conventional Western psychological models of the normal, healthy person. And meditation practice appeared to be an important key to those farther reaches. So he sat.

Today Welwood acknowledges that one of the most important things he learned from meditation was what it didn't teach him much about how to have a successful intimate relationship with another human being. On the other hand, he didn't get a lot of useful clues from Western psychology about the hauntingly thin line between affection and apprehension, devotion and demoralization. Why do relationships that so often begin in mutual tenderness so often end in something like mutual terrorism?

When Welwood's first marriage ended in divorce, he set out to discover what it would take to have what he calls "an awake, conscious relationship": how to work with the obstacles that interfere with the free flow of love; how not to let ego battles, family background and conditioned patterns sabotage the potential for deeper connection between two people.

Having written seven books (*Journey of the Heart* and *Love and Awakening* were both Marin and Bay Area bestsellers) and more than fifty articles on relationship, psychotherapy, consciousness, and personal change, Welwood is still asking questions. He practiced as a psychotherapist for twenty years, but now describes his work with individuals and couples as “spiritually-oriented work.” I spoke to Welwood in Mill Valley on a day when the news media was covering a suicide assault on a school bus filled with unsuspecting children. This happened “somewhere else.” It seemed very near.

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### **Lots of different maps for relationship territory. Where do you put down your fences?**

I find it helpful to distinguish between absolute/unconditional and relative/conditional love. Absolute love is like the light of the sun—it continually shines through us, whether we are open to it or not. Even on a cloudy day, the sun is always shining. It's choiceless. This is because our true nature, our original essence *is* love, a powerful blend of openness and warmth. The human heart is a channel through which absolute love streams into this world.

But this channel is often obstructed. So we inevitably experience love through our filters, which are like clouds in the sky. Relative or conditional love is like filtered sunlight—the sun starts to come out when we feel attraction, when another pleases us, but soon disappears behind the clouds when we are displeased. So relative love is not steady or reliable, it's like a partly cloudy day.

### **What do the clouds represent? Where do they come from?**

Clouds are a metaphor for the conditioned personality, the accumulation of fears, hurts, defenses, grievances that effectively hide the sun, or diminish the presence of love in our lives. I used to think of the clouds as obscuring love, but now I'm coming to think of the clouds as functions of love itself. In the sense that anger, competitiveness, jealousy, meanness, grief, insecurity, fear of abandonment are all reactions against not feeling fully loved. If we have not felt fully loved, we

carry that experience in our bodies. We do not entirely trust love and may even turn away from it. But if we have had some experience of being held in the arms of love, we can usually take more risks in opening ourselves to it.

**That's how it feels during the falling in love stage.**

The beginning of a relationship is usually a time of incredible openness between two people. A time when both partners directly and immediately experience the powerful being-to-being connection that is the essence of love. Oh sure, your partner has his or her little flaws and imperfections. But at first you don't even notice them or give them any importance. That's because the sun is out, full blaze, for both partners. It's only later, as the relationship progresses, that the clouds of each individual's personal issues get in the way. Old emotional wounds and disappointments get reactivated, many of them going back to the earliest experiences in life. Then each person tends to project all their old grievances, stemming from old wounds, onto the new relationship, and harden their defenses.

**You've written about what you call the "universal human wound."**

That's the feeling of not being loved, especially not being loved for who we are. Most of us have had at least some glimpse of unconditional love in our lives. The child is born, and the parents are delighted by the sheer presence of this beautiful being in their lives. It's the same with falling in love. We're simply dazzled by the other person, it's like magic. The clouds part, the sun shines, birds sing. But that sense of profound openness and acceptance doesn't continue in a consistent or reliable way, because we all have conditioned personalities and emotional issues that get in the way. This is where the real path of relationship begins, as we learn to work skillfully with what gets activated.

**Identifying one's own cloud cover seems like a good place to start.**

Yes. It's crucial, yet quite challenging to work with the emotional issues that shut down our heart and block our soul, or essential nature, from fully blossoming. We need to learn to tap the solar power of our larger nature, which has the strength to burn off the clouds of the conditioned personality. In writing my two books on

conscious relationship—*Journey of the Heart* and *Love and Awakening*—I saw that there was a tremendous need for a whole new approach to relationship today. We need a new vision of relationship that can help us understand and use its challenges as opportunities for personal transformation. If we don't hold the challenges of relationship in this kind of larger vision, I don't see how relationships can remain vital and strong, or even durable in times like these.

### **Why is it so easy for one's partner to become the personification of past disappointments?**

Each of us has an image of the “bad other”—the one who hurt us, who didn't fully love or understand us—stored in our psyche, just ready and waiting to be projected onto the one we love the most. When someone you care about says no to you, it's remarkable how quickly and seamlessly he or she can become the living embodiment of every rejection you've ever experienced. It's hard to see this when you're in the middle of acting it out. You become swept up in the grievance movie: "See, nobody really loves, respects, or cares about me. You're just like all the rest." And then you have to get back at them: "I'll show you that you can't treat me like this." Meanwhile, your partner is reacting to you the same way, and the conflict escalates. Many couples are shocked and confused by how quickly the honeymoon can dissolve into acrimony. This happens because we all carry a stored-up grievance against the bad other that is easily triggered.

### **It's not pleasant to ponder the possibility that each of us is carting around unfinished emotional business. Much easier to focus on what other people are doing wrong.**

Yes, that's why we need to understand relationship as a path of spiritual development— so that we can work with our blind spots in a more creative, compassionate way. I use the term “soul connection” for two people's mutual recognition that they are in each other's lives to catalyze growth and bring out the best in each other. This is a marvelous opportunity. But there's a catch. The best can only come out if the worst can also come out.

### **Same emotional valve?**

I'm afraid so. The deeper the love between two people, the more it flushes out all the obstacles to love—our deepest, darkest wounds and unworked emotional reactivity. When their worst side starts coming out, most people see it as a threat to their love. But it's really the opposite: Love is the greatest healing power on earth, but it can only heal what presents itself to be healed. Love wants to bend and reshape us so that we become a clearer channel through which it can flow. It's as though the power of love brings these old wounds to the surface, so they can be held in love's embrace. If they stay hidden, they can't be healed. And if they're not healed, they keep generating clouds that block the flow of love. So to fully love, we must be willing to expose our wounds.

Of course, we get really freaked out when we see, hear, feel the worst parts of ourselves coming out and the reactions going back and forth. You shut down, and I react to your shutdown, and then you react to my reaction, and it keeps escalating. Most people are familiar with this kind of ego-to-ego combat, and with it comes a fork in the road. If you have some commitment to conscious relationship, and can hold this friction in the space of loving awareness, it can become what I call "sacred combat." Two partners are not only lovers, but also worthy opponents, who can help each other see exactly what they most need to see about themselves if they are to heal their old wounds and grievances, which only keep them stuck in the nightmare of the past.

### **Sounds suspiciously like growing up.**

Yes. Growing up means growing out of the emotional reactive patterns that were laid down in childhood. I should mention that an important part of this work is learning how to hold our emotions and reactivity in a space of kindness and understanding.

Beyond growing up, there's a greater possibility as well—waking up. A loving relationship can also help us plug into our deeper nature, the absolute radiance in our heart, so that we begin to connect with another person from this more inclusive, more genuinely loving part of ourselves. This means waking up to who we really are—that fundamental openness and warmth of the sun. It means learning to live more and more from that place, even when new clouds arise, as they will.

**The culture doesn't provide many models for understanding these dynamics as an integral part of relationships.**

To the extent that our culture has turned into an entertainment industry, it does nothing to prepare us for this work. So most of us enter relationships fairly clueless about what they will ask of us. The conventional message of Valentine's Day is that love should be all fuzzy and warm. There's not much recognition of the outrageous journey of transformation that love calls on us to undertake. When the sunlight of love pierces the clouds of self-defense, heat meets cold, the moisture in the clouds condenses, and storms ensue. That is what makes real clearings possible. Think of the freshness in the air after a big storm passes over. But if we think that love should only provide comfort and security, we will regard any turbulence as a problem, and wind up feeling bad about ourselves, our partner, or the relationship. And this only adds fuel to our grievance.

**Let's go back. If love is the very ground of our nature, why is love not a greater force in our political and economic life? Why is love not penetrating the collective level of human interactions?**

I have been asking exactly those questions, especially since September 11. A large part of the answer is that grievance increasingly rules our world. Attacking a bad other over there, who is causing all our problems, seems to drive our whole political dialogue. Why are political constituencies so energized by setting up this kind of target? This aggressive energy seems to be fueled by the perception that I don't feel seen, I don't feel recognized or validated, I don't feel honored or respected. In other words, the political arena is where the collective acts out, often in the crudest ways, the lack of love that so many individuals feel inside themselves.

Consider bin Laden. There's really no way this man could believe he would destroy America by attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. No, what he's doing is getting back. The Arab peoples have suffered more than a hundred years of humiliation and mistreatment at the hands of the Western powers. So this attack was a way of saying: "I matter, I count. I'll show you that you can't step on me." It's a demand to be seen, heard, recognized. When we

counter his attack only with a military response, without also addressing the underlying pain, despair, and rage that give rise to terrorism, it may wipe out this band of terrorists in the short run—but it doesn't resolve the fundamental problem in the long run.

**In couples therapy, one partner launches an attack. “I haven’t felt seen for so long, I’m going to let you have it.” The other partner counterattacks, or threatens to. It's the same kind of mutual escalation we see in the world.**

Yes. Sometimes one partner deals with threatening situations in a relationship by trying to control and intimidate the other partner. This might work for a while, but there's always a rebound. The partner who has been kept down eventually gets back in one way or another. It's the same in the Middle East. It's obvious that the brutal use of force does nothing but increase resentment and further violence.

So we are called on to do the same work at a collective level that we need to do in our personal relationships; namely, to see how we demonize a bad other, and how this only generates perpetual suffering, war, and insecurity. We need to grow up on the collective level too, and start bringing the spirit of love and compassion into the political arena. Although as a nation we may need to oppose our enemies with strength and determination, we also need to realize that they are human beings just like us, that humanity is one body, and that we're all in this together. If we dehumanize them, we dehumanize ourselves as well.

**A news report earlier today talked about people cheering, celebrating, crying with joy at the news that a bus filled with school children was turned into an inferno by bombers claiming to be acting in self-defense.**

All the religious traditions have tried to explain the problem of evil. Augustine came up with the idea of original sin. If you use religious doctrine as proof that people are basically bad, this makes it easy to righteously attack your enemy as evil incarnate. But Jesus never talked about original sin. Although there are evil behaviors, evil actions, I have faith in the underlying, original goodness of all human beings. As Arnaud Desjardins, a French spiritual teacher said, “There are

no bad people, only badly loved people.” The problem with glib formulations of evil is the way they create justification for maintaining the us-versus-them stance that generates all the war and violence in the world. Bin Laden attacks us as infidels in the name of Allah, and U.S. politicians invoke God when plotting who to bomb thousands of miles away.

**A suicide bomber as a badly loved person. I need a moment to wrap my mind around that.**

The suicide bomber has a deep sense of resentment, grievance, a desire to get revenge for being badly treated. He is willing to blow himself up to get back at you. Wow, we see that as alien, we can't understand it. Yet most of us do something similar, on a much lesser scale, in our relationships. In shutting down, hardening our heart, and attacking our partner as the bad other, we are destroying parts of ourselves.

**Our cultural stories are filled with this motif. If it's necessary for me to suffer deeply and irrevocably in the name of holding to my position, I will do so. I'll be a martyr to my grievance in order to get back at the bad other whom I believe wronged me.**

When couples come in to work on their issues, they often have twice as much energy for making their partner wrong than for setting things right. They have a tremendous investment in their complaint: “You did this to me, you said that to me.” Some people are so deeply committed to their grievance that they are willing to blow up the relationship and their own happiness just to prove their partner wrong. So in some sense they are “willing to die” for their grievance.

**To stay with the work you do, you must also see your share of transformations.**

Oh yes. Once two partners embrace relationship as a transformative journey, and learn how to work with their reactive emotions and conditioned patterns, all things become possible. Their relationship becomes a living process of discovery, rather than a finished product. Eventually they realize that a great relationship with their partner also requires them to develop a great relationship with

themselves— by connecting with who they most deeply are. And when you finally discover that no one else can ever love you perfectly, you can finally lay down your grievance against other and open yourself more fully to the flow of love that is always there, streaming into the channel of the heart from the absolute source of everything.

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