

LOVE AND UNIQUE SELF

THE TRUE NATURE OF YOUR VALUES is always revealed in death. At your funeral, you will hear in the eulogies, both in what is spoken and unspoken, something of the essential nature of your life and loyalties. Sometimes, however, before you die, you are strangely privileged with a final invitation to declare where your ultimate loyalty lies. The moments before your death might be joyous or tragic.

It was September 11, 2001. The planes had just crashed into the Twin Towers in Manhattan. People had very short moments to use their cell phones. No one called asking for revenge. No one offered philosophical explanations or profound insights into the nature of reality. People did one thing and one thing only: they called the people close to their heart to say, “I love you.” “I love you” is our declaration of faith. Implicit in those words is everything holy.

And yet we no longer really know what we mean when we say, “I love you.” It used to mean, “I am committed to you. I will live with you forever.” Or it might have meant, “You are the most important person in my life.” But it no longer seems to mean that. The old Greek, Thucydides, wrote in his great work *The Peloponnesian War* something like, “When words lose their meaning, culture collapses.” When you no longer understand your own deepest declarations of love, you are lost. The very foundation of meaning upon which your world rests is undermined. You lose your way. You become alienated from love, which is your home. Despair, addiction, and numbness become your constant companions.

For so many of us, love has lost its luminosity as the organizing principle of our lives. Love seems to have diminished power to locate us and to guide us home. “I love you” has become banal, casual, and desiccated.

One day you feel the love; the next day you do not. One day love holds you in the place of your belonging, and the very next day you are cast out, exiled, and lost. For so many of us, “I love you” has ceased to be a place where we can find our home.

What do you really mean when your highest self says to another, “I love you”?

And if I might audaciously add to the question: why do all the great traditions, in one way or another, talk about the obligation to love God and love your neighbor? In the tradition of Kabbalah, this obligation to love God and one another is called a *mitzvah temidit*, a “constant obligation of consciousness.” But does this truly resonate with our experience? Actually, if we admit it to ourselves, this injunction makes little sense. How does a human being love God? Is God lovable? Can you touch God, cuddle with God, or actually feel rushing love for God without entering into an altered state?

What emotional affect is there to the love of God? And does not that emotional affect, if it is even an authentic possibility for the common person, seem dangerously close to a kind of blind fundamentalist emotional faith?

How does one love God? And how can one be obligated to love another? How can you obligate an emotion? And can we truly feel love toward all of our neighbors? Isn't love reserved for the very few special people in our lives?

Said differently and more directly, what is love?

To know the way of Unique Self, you must know the way of love.

To find your destination in love, you must consider the reason for all of your detours. You must wonder about all of your wrong turns in love.

Where did you go wrong? Is there something you did not understand about the nature of love?

You are not alone in your questions. There is hardly a person alive who is conscious who has not asked these questions—this writer included. So I will speak to myself through you.

Love Is a Verb

If you are like most highly intelligent and sincere modern seekers, you are making two core mistakes about love. First, you think that love is an emotion.

When the emotion is gone, you feel like you are no longer in love and thus can no longer stay in the relationship.

Second, you automatically identify love with a particular emotion. The emotion with which you identify love is usually the emotion of infatuation. Both of these mistaken beliefs are significant obstacles on your path to spiritual liberation. Both of these mistakes obscure love's innate ability to take you home.

Love at its core is not an emotion. Love is a perception. Love is the ultimate verb. Love is a faculty of perception that allows you to see the inner nature of All-That-Is.

To love another human being is to perceive their True Nature. To love is to perceive the infinite specialness and divine beauty of the beloved.

To be a lover is to see beyond the limited and distorting vision of your separate-self contraction.

To be a lover is to see with God's eyes. Your beloved is both your lover and All-That-Is.

To be loved by another human being is to have your True Nature seen. Your True Nature is your Unique Self.

To love God is to let God see with your eyes, to empower God with the vision of your Unique Perspective. You are living out of a passion for God. You are being asked to live with God's eyes.

To act with God's eyes, to react with God's eyes, to write your Book of Life with God's eyes as God would see from your perspective. If you are successful, then your perspective becomes available to God. It finds God and feeds God. It gives God strength and joy. *You must consider that being a devotee is nothing but actually being God from a distinct perspective.*

This is the only truth about individuality. Mature individuality is not about being separate. It is about having a distinct perspective within the context of Union.

To be responsible for this perspective is to declare the truth from this vantage point, but without making it the only perspective, and without any degree of attachment to the vantage point we have clung to from the past—from our previous conditioning. This is what it means to be a lover.

This is the great paradox again and again. *To be a lover is to see with God's eyes. To love God is to let God see with your eyes.*

Once, I shared this understanding of love with the Dalai Lama. “Beautiful!” he exclaimed with sheer and utter delight.

Beautiful was the Dalai Lama in the direct and delicious expression of his delight. Particularly, he was excited to shift the understanding of love from an emotion to a perception.

It is this precise shift that clears up one of the great mysteries of love. Many great thinkers have been puzzled by the Hebrew wisdom commandment to love. How can you command an emotion? And yet in the evolutionary mysticism of Unique Self teaching, love is the ultimate commandment. Reading the old Hebrew text, “Love your neighbor as yourself—I AM GOD,” the answer to the puzzle is now clear.

Step one: Love is not an emotion. Love is a perception.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” is the seemingly impossible demand of the Hebrew book of Leviticus, echoed in the New Testament in the book of Matthew. At least this is how the text is usually cited. But the quote, as it is usually cited, is actually missing three words. It’s too short. What all too often gets left out of the passage are the three last, and perhaps most crucial, words. The complete verse is, “Love your neighbor as yourself—I AM GOD.” To love your neighbor is to know that the “I” is God. *To love your neighbor is to perceive God’s divine beauty in others and let it fill you with wonder and radical amazement.* To love your neighbor is to behold with wonder God’s infinite specialness. Love is what the Hindus called *bhakti*, to truly see the other bathed in their own divine radiance.

Love is not an emotion. Love is not infatuation.

Emotions are involuntary reactions that come from the nervous system. The emotion of infatuation is usually a preprogrammed reaction that takes place when you meet someone that you recognize. You re-cognize them because you remember them. They evoke in you a sense of familiarity and intimacy. They unconsciously re-mind you of your parents or early caretakers.

The person with whom you are infatuated holds out to you the possibility of completing the unfinished emotional business you have with your mother, father, or early caretakers. Or you fall in love with them as an expression of your unconscious rebellion or alienation from your parents or caretakers, whom you experience as painful or dangerous.

Only when you fall out of infatuation do you see—sometimes for the first time. Before then, your perception is blurred. Infatuation is blind. Love is a magnifying glass. Initially the perception yields a more complex and less rosy picture than the blind adulation of infatuation, but if you stay with it, remain focused, and invest your self with full passion and heart, the perception begins to clarify. You begin to genuinely see the full splendor and beauty of the one you love. The delight of love is a natural result of your perceptions.

Love is perception's gift. Love is a faculty of perception, which allows you to see the inner nature of All-That-Is. Love is a realization. *Love is a verb. Love is the true inner nature of All-That-Is. Love is.*

Love Is a Perception-Identification Complex

When we say that love is perception, we do not mean it is merely perception. It is, as we have implicitly seen in our discussion till now, a perception-identification complex. And this is not a complex in the Oedipal sense, but rather in the simplest sense of a two-part structure. Love is a two-part formula.

The beloved not only perceives the divine, the Unique Self of her lover; she identifies him with that divinity. *She understands his divinity as his essence. She sees and identifies her beloved with his infinite specialness.*

This notion of perception identification is most clear in reference to parents and children. You love your kids. The neighbor's kids, however—well, they are just so incredibly rambunctious, annoying, and immature.

In fact, we all recognize that there may be no appreciable difference between your kids and the neighbor's kids. Why then do you love your children and not the neighbor's? Not merely because they're your children, but rather, because they are *your* children, you are invested in them. This investment causes you to focus your vision on them more intensely than on other kids. The result: you are able to perceive them in ways other people are simply unable to do. You perceive your child's beauty in a way that no one quite grasps.

But perception is not enough. If you are a good parent, you know your child also has faults, and those shortcomings are real. They need to be addressed forthrightly and never swept under the rug. Remember, love is

not blind; infatuation is blind. Love is a microscope. Parents should be madly in love with their kids—they should never be infatuated with them.

How is it then that you love your children even after you know their long laundry list of faults? The answer lies in the second step of the love formula, identification. You perceive both your child's goodness and their flaws—but you identify their goodness as the true core of who they are. All the rest you will deal with in whatever way necessary—but you know that at core the “trailing clouds of glory” are the essence of your child. And you love them for it. With kids not our own, what we often (wrongly) tend to do is identify the child with their failing or acting out instead of with their infinite specialness and grandeur.

Have any of your friends ever gotten engaged, and the response of your circle was something like, “I can't believe it! SHE is going to marry . . . HIM? Candice . . . is going to marry . . . Tom??!!” We do not understand what she sees in him. But see in him she does. She perceives him, sees him, discloses him in a way that we are unable to access. How did Emily Dickinson say it? “Not ‘revelation’—tis—that waits, but our unfurnished eyes.” Our eyes are too “furnished” to see the miraculous, infinitely unique gorgeousness that is Tom. *To love is to see with unfurnished eyes.* But let there be no mistake about it—Tom is stunningly gorgeous. To Candice, the man is a miracle. The word “miracle” comes from the Latin *mirari*, meaning “to behold with rapt attention.” Candice has beheld the glory of Tom and found him to be divine. She has seen his infinite uniqueness, the snowflake essence of his soul that most miraculously never melts. To love is to witness the miracle of your beloved. Love is a Unique Self Perception.

Love, Being, and Becoming

To say that love is a perception of the True Nature of things is to recognize that love is subversive. The emperor struts around in his clothes. But it is not really the emperor. It is the servant disguised as the emperor. The separate self in the form of a skin-encapsulated ego rules the roost. The servant has displaced the king. Along comes love, and pierces the heart of all illusions. The true heart opens, and reality re-appears in its full and undivided majesty and splendor. The lover is the great hero who ushers in—through the penetrating power of their perception—a new world order.

Sometimes perception is a result of intense and sustained effort. This is called in the old sacred texts “arousal from below.” At other times, it is a free gift of the Uni-verse. This is called “arousal from above.”

There are moments when your eyes just open with delight. You have been gifted by the Uni-verse with a direct perception of essence. Your heart opens, your breath draws in, and you fall in love for a moment. It might be the ocean, a radiant sunset, the erotic curve of the feminine, or the lean, angular throbbing of the masculine. It might be a thirteen-petaled rose, a baby, precious stones, or a person fully in their gift.

All of these give you a direct, unearned gift of essence. A gift of love.

The first few examples are images of being. The last example, a person fully in their gift, is an image of manifested becoming. It is the revelation of Unique Self.

Love is a Unique Self Perception.

The old Hindu Upanishads teach, “Where there is other, there is fear.” This describes your consciousness at the level of ego. If, however, you have upleveled your consciousness and are living as Source—from the place of your Unique Self—the teaching changes: “Where there is other, there is love.”

The Perception of Love Creates a New Reality

Marriage in the old world served many ends. It created personal security and a stable context for parenting, and it ensured that order, and not chaos, reigned in society. Marriage in the new world is a Unique Self encounter.

As is often the case, an old text contains seeds of the new paradigm. An old Aramaic text reads, “The bride and groom reveal the Shekhinah.” What might that mean? Do you know that moment in a wedding when it really happens? It has nothing to do with the music, catering, hall, or any of the other fanfare. It is that fraction of a second when they walk down the aisle or are standing at the altar or under the canopy. You feel the revelation that always waits for our unfurnished eyes. The bride and the groom look at each other. It is a glorious moment of Unique Self perception. They see each other in all of their depth and wonder. At that moment, the marriage is consummated.

But it is even more than that.

We become more—the more we are seen and recognized. The level of love after thirty years of life together is vastly and incomparably deeper than the love available at the wedding altar.

But it is even more than that.

Physics reminds us that perception not only observes but creates reality. See your beloved at their highest, and you will deepen and empower their highest. You then live with their highest. When you see your beloved at their lowest, you empower and deepen the lowest. You then live with their lowest.

Liquid Love—To See the Future in the Now

Part of perception identification requires the lover to be a visionary. To touch in the now what might be in the future. The lover's perception intuits unfolding and growth long before it actually manifests. If in any moment you are so enamored that you say, like Goethe's Dr. Faustus, "Linger, Thou Art Fair," you forfeit your soul. For what you have done is to freeze the moment and stop growing. Unique Selves are always unfolding. Unique Self is both a point of origin and a destination. We grow, but we were really always there to begin with—the fully developed lover senses the destination in the point of origin.

The Seer of Lublin, a nineteenth-century biblical mystic, said this:

There are three kinds of friends in the world.

An ordinary friend sees you as you appear to be.

An extra-ordinary friend sees you for what you can be.

But in the presence of the highest friend—you already are.

To love a person is both to perceive a person and to identify them with the best, not just of who they are, but who they could become. We are not simply human beings; we are human becomings. In fact, in the original Hebrew the words "I am" do not exist. "I am" in Hebrew is rather "I will become." Likewise, in the old Hebrew story, when Moses asks God his name, God answers, *ekyeh asher ekyeh*. Usually this strange and potent phrase gets translated as "I am what I am." But the actual translation is "I will be what I will be." God is "will be." God is Becoming.

To love is to see in an other what they cannot yet see themselves. “I love them for the person they want to be. I love them for the person they almost are.” And somehow, through being loved, we begin to be who we want to be, who we really are. To love is to embrace another, not only as a human being but as a human becoming.

Words are a freezing of reality. Before I put the chapter down on paper it is infinite, liquid-like, and emerging. The second I pick one of the infinite possible turns of phrase, it becomes frozen. For every word I choose, a thousand others are rejected. How much more of a human violation it is when I freeze another person into what they are at a particular moment. *Worse yet to freeze people into their moments of fall and failure. That is a great failure of love.*

“Love is a Unique Self Perception” has four words too many. The truth is, quite simply, love is. For love has really been here all the time. *Love is the infinite, pulsating erotic energy of life and goodness that is the fabric of Being.* When we realize that love is, then we understand ever more deeply that love is but a shift in perception.

The Secret Is in the Eyes

An emotion cannot be commanded; perception can. The emotion of love is neither flickering nor fickle. It is directly dependent on the energy and effort of your perception.

There is an old mystical tradition that the world rests on thirty-six hidden saints. They are the polished gemstones of God’s evolutionary creation. Israel, Master of the Good Name, was the leader of this group in his generation. He indulged his disciples with the stories and teachings he would hear from these sacred saints.

“But we want to see them also,” begged his students. Day after day they pressed him to reveal the hidden men to them as well.

“So be it,” said Israel.

At the close of the following week, he said to his disciples. “So . . . were you not impressed by them greatly?”

“But what do you mean?” replied the astonished disciples, “Impressed by who? We didn’t see a single saintly soul.”

“Ahh,” said the master. “So you did not see them. That doesn’t mean they were not there. Remember the beggar who came for a loaf of bread? A saint!

And the young widow crying that she had lost her husband? She too was one of them. And the juggler in the circus on Thursday? He too was of their number.”

“Holy disciples,” said the master to his beloved students. “The secret is in the eyes. The secret is in the eyes.”

I bless you, dear friend and reader, with eyes to see. To see the saint hidden in each passing face. Who knows, perhaps you too are one of their number, so well hidden that even you have yet to perceive your hidden light.

Self-Love

Israel, Master of the Good Name, has a wonderful teaching on the Hebraic mandate “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” First, it is a statement of fact—you love your neighbor precisely as much as you love yourself. *You can only perceive another’s greatness if you have glimpsed and believe in your own.*

Self-love is self-perception.

If this is so, then a powerful question arises! How do you love your self when you know all of your foibles, pathologies, and blemishes? If self-love is self-perception, does not honest perception yield all the reasons that we are not lovable? And yet most of us manage, at least to some degree, to love ourselves. Is it just self-deception? No, not at all. Love, as we have unpacked it together, is not merely perception. It is a perception-identification complex. Self-perception means that, although I am aware of the full complexity of my personae—the good, the bad, and the ugly—I identify the essence of who I am with my good. With my good, loving, giving, creative, and generous self.

That does not mean I deny my beast. It is, of course, critical to integrate all of me into my self-picture.

But the essence, the core of who I am, remains my goodness, virtue, and beauty. To love your self is to identify your self as part of the Shekhinah. Writes Master Israel, “To love yourself is to love the Shekhinah.” Not to love yourself is to send the Shekhinah into exile. So proclaim the Kabbalists.

To which Rumi adds:

By God, when you see your beauty
you will be the idol of yourself.

In your deepest nature you must know that you are the hero of your story. In your deepest nature you are love, grace, strength, and splendor. Now you must decide to identify with your deepest nature. Do you focus on your innocence or your guilt? Do you focus on your inevitably dirty hands, or on your eternally pure spirit? To love yourself or anyone else, you need to know that your innocence is your essence. That your innocence is never lost. That you remain always worthy of love, even as you muster all of your energy and commitment to the evolution of your essence.

Self-love is a shift in perception in which you embrace—maybe for the first time—the full wonder of who and what you are. That is what it means to accept God. Perception always begins with knowledge—self-knowledge. Self-knowledge does not mean long-term intensive psychotherapy that explores every nook and cranny of your psyche.

Self-love means the perception and identification of your deepest self. Which raises the essential human question, “Who am I? Am I the public me that goes to work and office parties, or the private me, the sum total of all those deep and dark secrets I keep so carefully hidden?”

Evolutionary mysticism points to a different figure to stand forward when their name is called: the third me. The Unique Self.

The Three Faces

You have three faces. The first face, the social you, is called in the Zohar the “revealed world.” Much of capitalist, accomplishment-driven, middle-class bourgeois society believes that this first face is the real you. The second face, the primal raging of the subconscious, is called by the Zohar the “hidden world.” Freud believed that the real you is the second you, while the outside persona is just the thin veneer of culture. Evolutionary mysticism, however, teaches that your deepest face is your third face—Unique Self—what the Aramaic texts call *umka de umka*, the “deepest of the deep”! In the language of Abraham Kook, “The truth of your essence reveals itself in the moment of your greatness.”

It is those moments of greatness that set the standard that defines you, that are you. Who you really are is you at your best.

During my first year as a rabbi in Palm Beach, Florida, there was one bar mitzvah boy I will never forget. Louis was his name, and he was the first child

to be bar mitzvahed during my tenure. He and his parents came to my office just a few weeks after I arrived, in what turned out to be quite a disturbing meeting. You see, Louis was not a happy camper. He was overweight, awkward, and socially ill at ease, none of these traits easy for a twelve-year-old trapped in the superficiality of a culture that idolized fitness, grace, and cool.

But to add to the taunts of his peers, his parents seemed to be doing their fair share of damage to Louis's self-esteem. The parents informed me, with him in the room, that Louis was not the brightest kid, and that he probably would not be able to read the usual portion from Prophets that were usually read by other bar mitzvah boys. They figured that it would be enough for him to recite the blessings and be done with it. When they left my office I was bewildered, angry, and near tears. Perhaps it was his parents' insensitivity, or perhaps his awkwardness reminded me of myself at his age. I resolved to do something.

In the ensuing six months, I met with Louis approximately three times as much as I would have met with another bar mitzvah boy. To my extreme delight, I found that Louis had a beautiful singing voice and could do the normal reading from Prophets, but I believed that he could do more. Thus, we trained not only for the Prophets, but the entire biblical reading for the week, no mean feat for a thirteen-year-old by any standard. We practiced and practiced and practiced.

Come the morning of the bar mitzvah, Louis got up, and I tell you that angels carried his every word. He shined! He glowed! The room and the heavens stood still in awe and wonder at the beauty and grace that was Louis. I got up to give the speech that I had prepared, but only one thought filled my mind. I had to speak directly to Louis. I had to make sure he realized the full magnificence—and significance—of that moment. The whole congregation seemed to disappear as I turned to Louis and let the words flow from my mouth: "Louis, this morning you met your real self. You are unique, gorgeous, and beautiful. You are your best. This is who you really are. In this moment, your Unique Self shines with laser-like brilliance. It is who you are. You are good, graceful, talented, and smart. Whatever people told you yesterday, and Louis, whatever happens tomorrow, promise me one thing, remember . . . this is you. Remember, and don't ever lose it."

Several months after his bar mitzvah, Louis's family moved away, and I lost track of him. But a few years back I received a letter from Louis. He had just graduated from an Ivy League university, was beginning medical school in the fall, and was engaged to be married. The letter was short. It read, "High school was a nightmare. Sometimes I didn't think I would make it through. But I kept my promise—I always remembered my bar mitzvah morning when you said that this feeling of being absolutely special and beautiful is who I really am. Thank you."

The truth of who you are is you at your best.

Self-Love Is Not Narcissism

The master Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said, "A decent person never deceives others, and a special person never deceives himself."

To say that you are anything less than you at your best, at your most wondrous and beautiful, is to deceive yourself, deceive others, and to deceive God. In the end, though, the greatest deception is to think that you are separate and ordinary.

Whenever I talk to people about self-love—which is, after all, according to most authorities, the most important injunction and the goal of all life—there is always a group that gets upset. It sounds narcissistic, they claim, or it will lead to selfishness.

So let's take a moment to make two clear distinctions. Narcissism is to be in love with your separate self—your mask. This is not a good idea, because sooner or later masks fall off, and then you are left loveless. Self-love is to love your unique interior—your Holy of Holies.

Selfishness is to narrow your circle of caring until it includes only yourself and perhaps those that directly affect your well-being. *Selfishness is a narrowing of your identity. That is definitive non-erotic thinking. Self-love, by contrast, is not self-centered at all; it is ultimately expansive.*

Self-love is radically erotic in that it is the experience of being interwoven within the great One Taste fabric of being. It is the deep intuition that the world is a unified, loving consciousness in which you participate and which lives in you even as you are an indivisible part of it. To think you are not lovable is the ultimate arrogance, because it says that you are separate from God.

JOY AND UNIQUE SELF

HERE IS THE SIMPLE TRUTH ABOUT JOY: You won't find it in the ways you have learned to search for it all your life. When you pursue joy, it runs away from you.

A student came to his master and said, "Teacher, you taught me that if I run from honor, then honor will pursue me. Well, I have been running from honor for many years now, and honor is still not pursuing me."

"The problem," replied the master, nodding sagaciously, "is clearly apparent. When you run from honor, you are always looking over your shoulder to see if honor is pursuing you—so honor is confused, not quite sure which way you are going."

Joy, like honor and serenity and so much else we ache and sweat for, is only available to us when we actively seek something else instead.

The Babylonian Talmud discusses several wisdom texts that seem to hold contradictory views on joy. One set of passages denies the possibility of achieving true joy, while the second set is far more encouraging.¹

A resolution is achieved by explaining that the two texts are in fact talking about two different sorts of joy. The first is joy as a detached value—a towering ideal, a castle that rests on an ever-retreating horizon. The second is happiness as a by-product—the ever-present companion that walks with life's meaningful goals. The Talmudic conclusion in a nutshell: Joy as a detached value is not achievable; joy pursued as an ideal, for its own sake, will never be attained. Happiness can only be realized as the by-product of the pursuit of some other goal.