

The Spectrum of Love... or Start from Where You Are

[The Spectrum of Love](#)

by Alan Watts

transcript from an old radio presentation by Alan Watts
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We know that from time to time there arise among human beings people who seem to exude love as naturally as the sun gives out heat. These people, usually of enormous creative power, are the envy of us all, and, by and large, man's religions are attempts to cultivate that same power in ordinary people. Unfortunately, they often go about this task as one would attempt to make the tail wag the dog. I remember that when I was a small boy in school, I was enormously interested in being able to do my schoolwork properly. Everyone told me that I did not work hard enough, that I ought to work harder, but when I asked, "How do you work?" everybody shut up.

I was extremely puzzled. There were teachers who apparently knew how to work and who had attained considerable heights of scholarship. I thought that maybe I could learn "the secret" by copying their mannerisms. I would affect the same speech and gestures and, insofar as I could get around the school uniform, even clothing. (This was a private school in England, not a public school in America.)

None of this revealed the secret. I was, as it were, copying the outward symptoms and knew nothing of the inner fountain of being able to work. Exactly the same thing is true in the case of people who love. When we study the behavior of people who have the power of love within them, we can catalogue how they behave in various situations, and out of this catalogue

formulate certain rules.

One of the peculiar things we notice about people who have this astonishing universal love is that they are often apt to play it rather cool on sexual love. The reason is that for them an erotic relationship with the external world operates between that world and every single nerve ending. Their whole organism—physical, psychological, and spiritual—is an erogenous zone. Their flow of love is not channeled as exclusively in the genital system as is most other people's. This is especially true in a culture such as ours, where for so many centuries that particular expression of love has been so marvelously repressed as to make it seem the most desirable. We have, as a result of two thousand years of repression, "sex on the brain." It's not always the right place for it.

People who exude love are in every way like rivers—they stream. And when they collect possessions and things that they like, they are apt to give them to other people. (Did you ever notice that when you give things away, you keep getting more? That, as you create a vacuum, more flows in?)

Having noticed this, the codifiers of loving behavior write that you should give tax deductible institutions and to the poor, and should be nice to people, that you should act towards your relatives and friends and indeed even enemies as if you loved them (even if you don't). For Christians and Jews and believers in God, there is a peculiarly difficult task enjoined upon us; namely, that "thou shalt love the Lord thy God," not only going through the motions externally, but with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And that is, of course, very demanding indeed.

It is as if, for example, we admired the music of a certain composer and, having studied his style very thoroughly, we drew up rules of musical composition based upon the behavior of this composer. We then send our children to music school

where they learn these rules in the hope that if they apply them, they will turn into first-class musicians, which they usually fail to do. Because what might be called the technique of music—as the technique of morals, as well as the technique of speech, of language—is very valuable because it gives you something to express. If you don't have anything to say, not even the greatest mastery of English will long stand you in good stead.

So the question and the puzzle remain: You cannot imitate this thing . . . there is no way of “getting” it, and yet it is absolutely essential that we have it. Obviously, the human race is not going to flourish harmoniously unless we are able to love each other. The question becomes: How do you get it? Is it something that you simply have to contract, like measles? Or, as theologians say, is it “a gift of divine grace” which somehow is dished out to some but not to others? And if there is no way of getting divine grace by anything you do, as the Calvinists aver, then hadn't we better just sit around and wait until something happens?

Surely, we can't be left in that sort of hopeless situation. There must be some way of getting “grace” or “divine charity” or “divine love”—some sort of way in which we can, as it were, open ourselves so as to become conduit pipes for the flow. And so the more subtle preachers try to see if we can open ourselves and teach methods of meditation and spiritual discipline in hope that we can contact this power. The less subtle preachers say ‘you don't have enough faith, you don't have enough guts, you don't have enough willpower...’ If you only put your shoulder to the wheel and shoved you would be of course an exemplar and a saint. Actually, you will only be an extremely clever hypocrite.

The whole history of religion is the history of the failure of preaching. Preaching is moral violence. When you deal with the so-called practical world, and people don't behave the way you wish they would, you get out the army or police force or “the

big stick." And if those strike you as somewhat crude, you resort to giving lectures—"lectures" in the sense of solemn adjuration and exhortation to "behave better next time."

Many a parent says to the child, "Nice children love their mothers. And I'm sure you're a nice child. You ought to love your mother, not because I, your mother, say so, but because you really want to do so." One of the difficulties here is that none of us, in our heart of hearts, respects love which is not freely given. For example, you have an ailing parent, and you are a son or daughter who feels dutifully that he should look after his parents because they've done so much for him. But somehow, your living with your father or mother prevents you from having a home and a life of your own, and naturally you resent it. Your parents are well aware that you resent this, even if they pretend to ignore it. They therefore feel guilty that they have imposed upon your loyalty. You in turn can't really admit the fact that you resent them for getting sick, even though they couldn't help it. And therefore no one enjoys the relationship. It becomes a painful duty to be carried out.

The same thing would naturally happen if, a number of years after having (at the altar) made a solemn and terrible promise that you would love your wife or husband come what may forever and ever "until death do you part," suddenly you find that you really haven't the heart to do it any more. Then you feel guilty, that you ought to love your wife and family.

The difficulty is this: You cannot, by any means, teach a selfish person to be unselfish. Whatever a selfish person does, whether it be giving his body to be burned, or giving all that he possesses to the poor, he will still do it in a selfish way of feeling, and with extreme cunning, marvelous self-deception, and deception of others. But the consequences of fake love are almost invariably destructive, because they build up resentment on the part of the person who does the fake loving, as well as on the part of those who are its

recipients. (This may be why our foreign-aid program has been such a dismal failure.)

Now, of course, you may say that I am being impractical and might ask, "Well, do we just have to sit around and wait until we become inwardly converted to learn, through the grace of God or some other magic, how to love? In the meantime, do we do nothing about it, and conduct ourselves as selfishly as we feel?"

The first problem raised here is honesty. The Lord God says, at the beginning of things, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." What appears to be a commandment is actually a challenge, or what in Zen Buddhism is called a koan, a spiritual problem. If you exercise yourself resolutely, and try to love God or your neighbor, you will find that you get more tangled up. You will realize increasingly that the reason you are attempting to obey this as a commandment is that you want to be the right kind of person.

But love is not a sort of rare commodity—everybody has it. Existence is love. Everybody has the force running. Perhaps the way in which you find the force of love operating in you is as a passionate like for booze or ice cream or automobiles or good-looking members of the opposite sex, or even of the same sex. But love is operating there. People, of course, tend to distinguish between various kinds of love. There are "good" kinds, such as divine charity, and there are allegedly "bad" kinds, such as "animal lust." But they are all forms of the same thing. They relate in much the same way as the colors of the spectrum produced by the passing light through a prism. We might say that the red end of the spectrum of love is Dr. Freud's libido, and the violet end of the spectrum of love is agape, the divine love or divine charity. In the middle, the various yellows, blues, and greens are as friendship, human endearment, and consideration.

Now it's said that selfish people "love themselves." I would say that that belies a misunderstanding of the whole thing: "yourself" is really something that is impossible to love. One obvious reason for this is that one's self, when you try to focus on it to love it or to know it, it is oddly elusive.

Let me illustrate why. Once there was a fish who lived in the great ocean, and because the water was transparent, and always conveniently got out of the way of his nose when he moved along, he didn't know he was in the ocean. Well, one day the fish did a very dangerous thing, he began to think: "Surely I am a most remarkable being, since I can move around like this in the middle of empty space." Then the fish became confused because of thinking about moving and swimming, and he suddenly had an anxiety paroxysm and thought he had forgotten how. At that moment he looked down and saw the yawning chasm of the ocean depths, and he was terrified that he would drop. Then he thought: "If I could catch hold of my tail in my mouth, I could hold myself up." And so he curled himself up and snapped at his tail. Unfortunately, his spine wasn't quite supple enough, so he missed. As he went on trying to catch hold of his tail, the yawning black abyss below became ever more terrible, and he was brought to the edge of total nervous breakdown.

The fish was about to give up, when the ocean, who had been watching with mixed feelings of pity and amusement, said, "What are you doing?" "Oh," said the fish, "I'm terrified of falling into the deep dark abyss, and I'm trying to catch hold of my tail in my mouth to hold myself up." So the ocean said, "Well, you've been trying that for a long time now, and still you haven't fallen down. How come?" "Oh, of course, I haven't fallen down yet," said the fish, "because, because—I'm swimming!" "Well," came the reply, "I am the Great Ocean, in which you live and move and are able to be a fish, and I have given all of myself to you in which to swim, and I support you all the time you swim. Instead of exploring the length,

breadth, depth, and height of my expanse, you are wasting your time pursuing your own end." From then on, the fish put his own end behind him (where it belonged) and set out to explore the ocean.

Well, that shows one of the reasons it's difficult to love yourself: Your "spine isn't quite supple enough."

Another reason is that "oneself," in the ordinary sense of one's ego, doesn't exist. It seems to exist, in a way, in the sense that the equator exists as an abstraction. The ego is not a psychological or physical organ; it's a social convention, like the equator, like the clock or the calendar, or like the dollar bill. These social conventions are abstractions which we agree to treat as if they did exist. We live in relation to the external world in just exactly the same way that one end of the stick exists in relation to the other end. The ends are indeed different, but they're of the same stick.

Likewise, there is a polar relationship between what you call your "self" and what you call "other." You couldn't experience "other" unless you also had the experience of "self." We might say that we feel that one's "self" and the "other" are poles apart. Oddly, we use that phrase, "poles apart," to express extreme difference. But things that are "poles apart" are poles of something, as of a magnet, or a globe, and so are actually inseparable. What happens if you saw the south pole off a magnet with a hacksaw? The new end, opposite the original north pole, becomes the south pole, and the piece that was chopped off develops its own north pole. The poles are inseparable and generate each other.

So it is in the relationship between the "self" and the "other." Now if you explore what you mean when you say you "love yourself," you will make the startling discovery that everything that you love is something that you thought was other than yourself, even if it be very ordinary things such

as ice cream or booze. In the conventional sense, booze is not you. Nor is ice cream. It becomes "you," in a manner of speaking, when you consume it, but then you don't "have it" anymore, so you look around for more in order to love it once again. But so long as you love it, it's never you. When you love people, however selfishly you love them (because of the pleasant sensations they give you), still, it is somebody else that you love. And as you inquire into this and follow honestly your own selfishness, many interesting transformations begin to occur in you.

One of the most interesting of these transformations is being directly and honestly "selfish." You stop deceiving people. A great deal of damage is done in practical human relations by saying that you love people, when what you mean is that you ought to (and don't). You give the impression, and people begin to expect things of you which you are never going to come through with.

You know of people to whom you say, "I like so-and-so, because with him or her, you always know where you are." It's impossible to impose on people like that. On the other hand, if you say, "Can I come and stay over night with you?" and they don't want you, they'll reply, "I'm, sorry, but I'm tired this weekend, and I'd rather not have you." Or "Some other time." Well, that's very refreshing. If I feel the person hasn't been quite honest with me, and I accept their hospitality, I'm always wondering if they would really prefer that I wasn't there.

But one doesn't always listen to one's inner voice: we often pretend that it's not there. That's unfortunate, because if you don't listen to your inner voice, you are not listening to your own wisdom and to your own love. You are becoming insensitive to it just as your hosts are trying to suppress the fact that, for the time being, they don't want your presence. Likewise, let's suppose that you are married and have an unwanted baby. It is profoundly disturbing to a child

to have false love pretended to it. To begin with, the milk tastes wrong. The smell isn't right. The outward gesture is "Darling, I love you," but the smell is "You're a little bastard and a nuisance."

Very few of us can accept the idea that we don't love our children, because it seems to be unnatural. We say that mother-love is the most beautiful and natural thing in the world. But it isn't. It's relatively rare, and if you don't love your child, you confuse him or her. The child will respect you much more if you say, "Darling, you're a perfect nuisance, but I will look after you because I have to." Well, at least then everything is quite clear!

I found in personal relations of this kind a very wonderful rule: that you never, never show false emotions. You don't have to tell people exactly what you think "in no uncertain terms," as they say. But to fake emotions is destructive, especially in family matters and between husbands and wives or between lovers.

It always comes to a bad end. This, on the occasions when, for personal friends, I perform marriage ceremonies, instead of saying, "I require and charge you both that you shall answer in the dreadful Day of Judgment, etc.," I say, "I require and charge you both that you shall never pretend to love one another when you don't." This is a gamble. It is likewise a gamble to trust yourself to come through with love.

But there is really no alternative.

Now to trust oneself to be capable of love or to bring up love—in other words, to function in a sociable way and in a creative way—is to take a risk, a gamble. You may not come through with it. In the same way, when you fall in love with somebody else, or form an association with someone else, and you trust them, they may as a matter of fact not fulfill your expectations. But that risk has to be taken. The alternative

to taking that risk is much worse than trusting and being deceived.

When you say, "I will not trust other people, and I will not trust myself," what course remains? You have to resort to force. You have to employ stacks of policemen to protect you, and have to hold a club over yourself all the time, and say, "No, no. My nature is wayward, animal, perverse, fallen, grounded in sin." What then happens? When you refuse to take the gamble of trusting yourself to be capable of love, you become, if you will excuse this extremely graphic but nevertheless relevant simile, like a person who cannot trust himself to have bowel movements. Many children learn this from parents who do not trust them, and think they ought to have these movements in rhythm with the clock, which is a different kind of rhythm from that of the organism. People who cannot trust themselves to do even this take laxatives endlessly, as a result of which their whole system gets fouled up.

Exactly the same thing happens with people who can't trust themselves to go to sleep. They have to take all kinds of pills. And so also with people who can't trust themselves to love, and have to take all sorts of artificial and surgical measures to produce the effect of love for saving face. They become progressively more incapable of loving at all, and they create turmoil and misunderstanding and chaos in themselves and others and society.

In other words, to live, and to love, you have to take risks. There will be disappointments and failures and disasters as a result of taking these risks. But in the long run it will work out.

My point is that if you don't take these risks the results will be much worse than any imaginable kind of anarchy.

In tying up love in knots or in becoming incapable of it, you can't destroy this energy. When you won't love, or won't let

it out, it emerges anyway in the form of self-destruction. The alternative to self-love, in other words, is self-destruction. Because you won't take the risk of loving yourself properly, you will be compelled instead to destroy yourself.

So, which would you rather have? Would you rather have a human race which isn't always very well controlled, and sometimes runs amok a little bit, but on the whole continues to exist, with a good deal of honesty and delight, when delight is available? Or would you rather have the whole human race blown to pieces and cleaned off the planet, reducing the whole thing to a nice, sterile rock with no dirty disease on it called life?

The essential point is to consider love as a spectrum. There is not, as it were just nice love and nasty love, spiritual love and material love, mature affection on the one hand and infatuation on the other. These are all forms of the same energy. And you have to take it and let it grow where you find it. When you find only one of these forms existing, if at least you will water it, the rest will blossom as well. But the effectual prerequisite from the beginning is to let it have its own way.

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