

UNLIMITED LOVE

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ALTRUISM, COMPASSION,
AND SERVICE



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PREFACE

Sooner or later, all the peoples of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

THE REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

THE INSTITUTE for Research on Unlimited Love, a nonprofit organization, began in 2001 with initial funding from the John Templeton Foundation. Every institute owes the public a readable articulation of its subject matter. This Institute in particular requires such a statement because the word *love* is used in so many different ways, and yet our interest is specifically focused on the scientific understanding and practice of such remarkable phenomena as altruism, compassion, and service. This book is an initial effort to convey the meaning of generous unselfish love at the interface of science, ethics, and religion.

The Institute offers the following definition of unlimited love:

The essence of love is to affectively affirm as well as to unselfishly delight in the well-being of others, and to engage in acts of care and service on their behalf; unlimited love extends this love to all others without exception, in an enduring and constant way. Widely considered the highest form of virtue, unlimited love is often deemed a Creative Presence underlying and integral to all of reality: participation in unlimited love constitutes the fullest experience of spirituality. Unlimited love may result in new relationships, and deep community may emerge around helping behavior, but this is secondary. Even if connections and relations do not emerge, love endures.

The mission of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love is to help people to better understand their capacities for participation in unlimited love as the ultimate purpose of their lives. The Institute's goals are to:

- (1) fund high-level scientific research on altruistic and unlimited love;
- (2) develop a sustained dialogue between religion and science on the meaning and significance of unlimited love through publications and conferences;
- (3) disseminate the real story of unlimited love as it is manifested in the helping behaviors of those whose lives are devoted to giving to others;
- (4) enhance the practical manifestations of unlimited love across the full spectrum of human experience, including family life, education, leadership, community service, religion, and the professions, by providing conference opportunities and awards for innovative scholars and practitioners.

Our initial funded projects focus on six main program areas:

- ◆ *Human Development*—focusing on the biological, psychological, sociological, spiritual, and religious aspects of the human developmental trajectory;
- ◆ *Public Health and Medicine*—delving into questions of the effect of selfless love on mortality, therapy, and well-being;
- ◆ *Defining Mechanisms by Which Altruistic Love Affects Health*—exploring its effect on disease, immune cell function, learning, memory, and other health factors;
- ◆ *Other-Regarding Virtues*—examining the relationships among religion, spirituality, and altruism, and how they relate to social and interpersonal outcomes;
- ◆ *Evolutionary Perspectives on Other-Regard*—looking for possible connections between other-regarding love and the processes of natural selection;

- ◆ *Sociological Study of Faith-based Communities and their Activities in Relation to the Spiritual Ideal of Unlimited Love*—seeking, for example, to understand the nature of volunteerism and the ability of religiously motivated workers to combat antisocial behavior.

Research submissions to the Institute have covered a wide range of topics: deep altruism beyond kin boundaries; the physician-patient encounter; religion, giving, and volunteerism; generosity in organ donors and recipients; the healing benefits of love in veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; religious teachings and experiences in relation to loving behavior; uncompensated helping behavior in dolphins; the cognitive neuroscience of empathy; the behavioral neurology of love; putting love to the test in alcohol abuse rehabilitation; altruistic love in the family and early child development; and how faith-based communities develop expressions and understandings of altruistic caregiving.

The Institute has initiated collaborations with major national foundations and institutions to explore the place of unlimited love in the narrative of religious traditions, the humanities and arts, theology, ethics, education at all levels, and leadership. It extends its findings through conferences, publishing, national essay competitions for young people to express the importance of compassionate love in their development, and opportunities for scholars in science and religion to develop book proposals that will be supported after competitive review. The Institute's first major book, *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy and Religion in Dialogue*, developed in collaboration with the Fetzer Institute, is available from Oxford University Press (2002). White papers and other high-level research papers can be found on the Institute's website at www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org.

Starting a research institute on a topic such as unlimited love is a bit of an adventure, and there was no clear sense of what the response might be. But receiving more than three hundred twenty Letters of Intent from leading researchers in response to a Request for Proposals disseminated in January of 2002 showed how much serious scientific interest there is in this topic. After only one year of existence, the Institute has already shown itself to be rapidly attaining its footing. Its advisory board includes Steven C. Rockefeller, Jr., a managing director of Deutsche Bank; George E. Vailant, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School; Audrey R.

Chapman, director of the Science and Human Rights Program and the Program of Dialogue Between Science and Religion for the American Association for the Advancement of Science; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ph.D., professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University; and Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement. Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, vice-chair of the board of trustees of the Carter Center in Atlanta and another member of the advisory board, recently wrote, “You are off to a great start in this important area of research, and you and your colleagues are to be commended.”

The dominant paradigm of our time is scientific, and thus dialogues between science, religion, and ethics are vital to intellectual and practical progress. The scientific study of how ordinary good people give other-regarding love is important. What are their characteristics? What is their course of human development? Do they live relatively fulfilled, happy, healthy, and long lives in comparison with egoists? How did their parents influence them, if at all? As one of the twentieth century’s greatest scientists of altruism, Pitirim Sorokin, wrote about the study of the “ways and powers of love”:

We have studied the negative types of human beings sufficiently—the criminal, the insane, the sinning, . . . and the selfish. But we have neglected the investigation of positive types of *Homo sapiens*—the creative genius, the saint, the “good neighbor.” We know a great deal about the general characteristics of the subsocial types. But we know precious little of the general or typical properties of creative persons. What, if any, are the typical characteristics of altruistic persons?¹

We need to better understand how lives of generous love come into being, and armed with such understanding, we should encourage the pedagogy of love.

How can science help? It is unlikely that science can fully explain the behavior of people who live in ways more or less consistent with unlimited love. Perhaps the most important thing we can do is simply to tell the stories of unlimited love as these brighten the world in which we live. Love is less taught didactically or studied scientifically than it is *transmitted* through models.²

Yet science holds out great potential in this field. Teilhard de Chardin commented that the scientific understanding of the power of unselfish

love would be as significant in human history as the discovery of fire. Unselfish universal love is so important to our human future that we must examine it scientifically, thereby removing it from the domain of subjective “soft” truth and elevating it into that of objective “hard” truth. Why do we find more than one hundred thousand published scientific studies on depression and schizophrenia, and no more than a few dozen good studies on unselfish love? Because science has been largely focused on human deficits rather than on the positive side of our nature. Over the past fifteen years, my medical students have taken various forms of neurosis, psychosis, and personality disorder seriously since these are studied by scientific methods; yet they too often dismiss compassionate love for patients as “touchy-feely” because there is too little scientific attention given to it. The message is that compassion is not important enough to study. Why not bring these same scientific methods to the study of unselfish love? Why not apply every known scientific technique to the study of unselfish love, just as these have been widely applied to disease? What if we could absolutely prove that love heals mental illness and is vital to successful therapeutic outcomes in all areas of health care? What if we could absolutely prove that people who live more for others than for self have greater psychological well-being?

To some extent, we can study the opposites of love to understand what love requires. For example, Paul Connolly surveyed 352 children between three and six years of age from across Northern Ireland. Through the influence of the family, the local community, and the school, Roman Catholic and Protestant children have learned to loathe and fear one another even at these very young ages, deeply absorbing hatred and prejudice by age five. This early inculcation of hatred, reported in 2002, mirrors studies of the attitudes of Israeli and Palestinian children.³ Yet such inculcation of hatred does not imply that loving-kindness is not within the repertoire of human nature. Even in William Golding’s pessimistic novel *The Lord of the Flies*, a parable on human nature in which a group of English schoolboys is plane-wrecked on a deserted island and succumb to every form of selfishness and violence, young Simon remains kind and good to the end. We need to cultivate this goodness, and be certain that our religions and communities tap into this side of human nature rather than its opposite.

When science does focus on unselfish love, the media appear ready to take notice. A recent issue of the journal *Neuron* reports an Emory

University study revealing a biological basis for human cooperation.⁴ Functional MRI scans have identified a “biologically embedded” basis for altruistic behavior, with several characteristic regions of the brain being activated when players of a game called “Prisoner’s Dilemma” decide to trust each other and cooperate, rather than betray each other for immediate gain. This is, of course, a study of “I help you and then you will be inclined to help me,” not of “I help others, and others gain not me.” What might this study have to do with our interest in the latter form of love, which is not predicated on reciprocal response, and which makes no bargains and does not keep track of who reciprocates and who does not? It is perhaps the case that some of the same areas of the brain are involved in this purer form of love, or that such love is a transposition of cooperation to a higher level in which the agent perceives cooperation with God. We simply do not know, but will learn more. Do the great lovers of all humanity use the same regions of the brain highlighted in the Emory study, although freed from reciprocal considerations? Only further studies can answer this question. And are we so hard-wired for narrow loyalties and nationalistic “groupishness” that we can cooperate within our own group but not terribly well outside of it? In a time of escalated global conflict and weapons of mass destruction, learning more about how to encourage love for all humanity without exception is imperative.

In the final analysis, unlimited love is what God has for each and every one of us, and this is good news. The Institute seeks integral knowledge at the interface of science, human experience, and the underlying metaphysics of divine love.

UNLIMITED LOVE

INTRODUCTION

PROGRESS THROUGH LOVE

UNSELFISH LOVE for all people without exception is the most important point of convergence among all significant spiritualities and religions. We marvel at the ways and power of love and find in it the best hope for a far better human future. Innumerable everyday people excel in loving-kindness, not just for their nearest and dearest, but as volunteers on behalf of the neediest. Some people achieve miracles and become exemplars of generous pure love. How do our complex brains, unique imaginations, communicative abilities, reasoning powers, moral sense, and spiritual promptings give rise to the remarkable and not at all uncommon practice of unselfish love for our neighbors, or for those we do not even know? If we could answer this question and harness the power of love, the world would erupt into hope.

The question of how this unselfish love came to be led me to biology and evolution as a college student. How, I wondered, could this generative planet Earth give rise to a creature capable at its best of such remarkable love? It led me to an interest in various eastern religions in my early twenties, and eventually to the University of Chicago Divinity School, where in 1983 I wrote a doctoral dissertation on the idea of love within the context of Christian thought. After several years of college teaching, I concluded that the ideal of love had to be integrated with solid science in order to convince students of the time-honored yet paradoxical truth that in the giving of self lies the unsought discovery of self. I also became convinced that students only effectively study unselfish love when they practice it routinely, and that teachers can only be effective when they are themselves practitioners. In 1988 I left a college in New York for the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University, where for many years I have worked with and studied individuals and families grappling to maintain the spirit of love

in the context of Alzheimer's disease. Unlimited love must bring resurrection-of-a-sort even to the most deeply forgetful, or so I hypothesized.

In 2001 my integrative journey around the theme of love took an unexpected turn. Sir John Templeton, who has devoted his resources to the study of science and religion through the formation of the Templeton Foundation, invited me to direct a new research initiative into what he boldly named "unlimited love." This responsibility allowed me to facilitate the development of a positive scientific program integrating practice with high-level empirical research, religious-ethical ideas, and metaphysics. It was as though some creative higher presence in the universe had reached into my life with a huge challenge: "If giving is the best way of living, prove it!"

I grew to deeply appreciate Sir John's language of "unlimited love." After all, what could unselfish love for every person without exception be if not unlimited, at least in scope? Such love might sometimes have to be constructively "tough" to be effective, and it might take many forms ranging from compassion to correction, but underlying all the expressions of love is an affirmation of the goodness and potential in every life. Sir John understood "unlimited love" at its highest as God's love for humanity, and so did I. Ultimately, only divine love knows no limits. We human beings are limited creatures indeed. But to the extent that we can and do achieve significant other-regarding love by our evolved human nature, or by participation in the divine through grace, we move progressively forward.

Most of us have encountered memorably unselfish, genuinely kind, and deeply generous individuals, some of whom may have put themselves at considerable risk in the service of perfect strangers. We are struck by the emotional tone, intensity, and helping behavior of good parents, good neighbors, good friends, and good servants of all imperiled and needy people. It is natural to love one's children and friends, but less so to love strangers, enemies, or those made unattractive by severe illness. Yet only in leaning outward to all humanity does one transmit to children and friends the higher purpose that can elevate their lives beyond the confines of near-sighted emotional and material overindulgence. *Generous love for all others is the main purpose of our life, the most enduring source of meaning and dignity, and the basis for all lasting self-esteem.* This love seeks the good of the loved one and leaves all the secondary effects, such as psychological well-being and elevated self-esteem, to take care of themselves.

The alternatives to growth in love include a drifting malaise devoid of purpose and accomplishment (“just hanging out”), the pursuit of ultimately meaningless selfish goals connected with narrow ambitions and materialism, or descent into hatred. Before September 11, 2001, there was April 20, 1999, when thirteen students were gunned down at Columbine High School in Colorado. We are astounded at the downward spiral of relatively young people—of whatever creed or nationality—into a negative vortex of hatred and murderous suicide. In the absence of adult mentors who encourage them in the ways of unselfish love, the influences on them range from distorted religious teachings to graphic media violence. A few weeks after 9/11, Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister who has devoted his life to the ideal of *agape* or unselfish Christian love, and who is now known by television reruns of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” was widely quoted in the media for his response to a reporter’s question: “Mr. Rogers, what should parents tell their children?” Mr. Rogers was pensive, and then he answered what I believe we must all answer: “Tell them to keep their eyes on the helpers.” By setting the eyes and intellects of the young on unselfish love, we encourage spiritual growth in ourselves and in them.

We need to better understand how love can penetrate and transform young and old from emptiness to fullness. We need to have faith in love despite the turbulence of our times and of all times, and we need to emerge into a world where we not only respect but actually cherish one another. We need to bring every scientific, educational, spiritual, ethical, and religious insight to this emergence. We need an evidence-based shift in our images of human motivational structure and a renewed confidence in the genuineness of our helping inclinations. We owe this to humanity, to our dignity, and to the future.

If I were forced to select a motto for the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, it would be this: *In the giving of self lies the unsought discovery of self.* This fundamental law of life is simple, intuitive, and yet not clearly acknowledged. In essence, the paradoxical law is simple: to give is to live. And the root experience of love is, I think, the amazing realization that another person actually means as much or more to me than myself. Based on this realization, love as the gift of self is an act of faith because it neither expects nor requires anything in return. As the Buddhists say, true love implies that we “cease desiring.”

This paradoxical discovery of a better self includes the sense of elevated purpose that allows us to develop our gifts and talents. One does not seek such discovery, for this would defeat the genuine call of love for others. But such love always brings with it a sense of meaning, noble purpose, well-being, and creative endeavor. I recall the symbol of an Episcopal secondary school in New Hampshire. On top of the school shield is the pelican, a medieval symbol of Christian love because this bird will pluck its chest vein if need be in order to feed its offspring. Below the pelican are crossed swords, indicating that love must be accompanied by courage and justice. Last comes the open book, *libris*, indicating that studying only has meaning if it is an outgrowth of loving purposes. We should study and learn not for selfish reasons, but because we love unselfishly and realize that effective love is intellectually demanding.

Each of us, from the springtime of youth to the winter of old age, is free to experiment with the way of love and discover its truth. Reach out in loving-kindness to the person by you on the left or the right, whether at school, at home, at work, in your community, or in the hospice as you lay dying. Reach out in loving-kindness not because this will enhance your sense of purpose and self-esteem, although it probably will, but simply to help others in the spirit of generosity. Reach out in loving-kindness not because you expect any “payoff” in reputational gain or reciprocal response, although unselfish connections and relations may well result from such actions and give rise to a surprisingly deepened community. Forget yourself by pretending that you are a little demented, love others for the sake of others, and let all the unintended aftereffects such as improved well-being and community take care of themselves.

The giving of self in thankful celebration of the lives of others, and in concern for their well-being and in attentiveness to their needs, describes in general terms all the forms of higher love. Such love differs from the lower forms of “love,” by which we usually mean motivations that give rise to a concern for others only as means to the realization of selfish agendas. Such love may appear impressive but it is false and ephemeral. In all higher love, we forget our own agendas and discover others as independent centers of value. In stepping away from our old narrow selves to wider spheres of love, we will experience some sense of loss, but that will be entirely forgotten in the exciting discovery of our deeper nature. Because spiritual

growth—that is, growth in love—can never be coerced, each individual must grow into love at his or her own pace.

Love can take so many forms. As a professor, I am always impressed at graduation ceremonies when family members and friends gather joyfully around a loved one who has a new degree in hand. Their loving delight in his or her successful completion of studies and in the start of a new stage of life is unmistakably written on their faces and heard in their tone of voice. Such joy is palpable, meaning that it is easily observed and felt by anyone awake to those around them. Here love takes the form of *celebration*, and we need these occasions to remind us that our life is a blessing. The extent to which well-wishers can forget their selfish concerns and enter a playful freedom from the usual anxieties of life is remarkable. In times of celebration, we give ourselves and we discover ourselves.

Love can take the form of active *compassion* when someone is suffering and needs support. Compassion includes responsive helping behavior. It is an emotional state with practical consequences. In times of compassion, we give ourselves and we discover ourselves.

Love can take the form of *forgiveness* when someone needs to be reconciled with the community, with loved ones, or with a nation after making mistakes of significance. Everyone who is truly apologetic deserves to be forgiven. Forgiveness is powerfully articulated in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:10) and in Psalm 103:8–13, where we are told that "The Lord is merciful and gracious." The theme is brought forward in many New Testament parables, such as the parable of the unforgiving slave (Matthew 18:21–35), and in the epistles, such as Romans 14:5–12. In times of forgiveness, we give ourselves and we discover ourselves.

Love can take the form of *care* when someone falls ill and has needs that only others can meet. Every day, family caregivers tend to the needs of children, of older adults, and of loved ones generally. Professional caregivers, from the health professional to the social worker, are trained to give competent care as needed. We are all dependent beings at many points in the journey of life. In times of care, we give ourselves and we discover ourselves.

Love can take the form of *companionship* when solitude grows tiring. The simple experience of being with another in friendship is a form of love. Breaking bread together is companionship, and thus the sharing of meals

has meaning. Offering wisdom in quiet confidential conversation is companionship. Attentive listening in which one tries to be fully present rather than distracted is companionship as well. In times of companionship, we give ourselves and we discover ourselves.

Love can take the form of *correction*. It always affirms the value of all others, but it will not affirm hatreds and harmful actions. Love leads through courage, strength, and wisdom in effectively restraining evil. It should not be arrogant, self-righteous, or in many cases, overly certain of its perspective on events. And yet love requires us to deter wrongdoing after motivational self-examination and conscientious discernment. Love is ready to skillfully confront behaviors that are self-destructive as well as destructive of others. As psychiatrist M. Scott Peck writes, love must be willing to take “the risk of confrontation.”¹ But in confrontation, love must never give way to malice. Love often confronts only indirectly through questioning, example, suggestion, and the gentle forms of shaping influence; and yet maleficence in its fervor will require something more direct. In times of tough love, we give ourselves and we discover ourselves.

Giving ourselves in unselfish love is transformative. Religious traditions have always captured this insight in their narratives. The *Rg Veda*, for example, a foundational Hindu text, introduces the concept of *Rta*, or sacrifice, into cosmology and human growth. Sacrifice of the old self is a necessary prerequisite for any subsequent development. This constitutes a law of nature, just as the shell of an egg must be broken through in order for a bird to be born and fly, or a cocoon must be ruptured for the butterfly to emerge. Christianity speaks of *kenosis*, a Greek word meaning literally “emptying” in spiritual generosity to open the heart of another (Philippians 2:6–11). The self that is unloving is untransformed. It is like the snow and cold wind of a bitter winter. When the weight of selfishness is lifted, fragrances of spring make us into something more and better. This is the universal law of renewal. One finds a new self in deep forgetfulness of the old. Everything that is objectively good, both ethically and spiritually, is grounded in this *kenotic* renewal. Buddhism takes the view that the possessive ego and selfishness are the root of all suffering, and that one can overcome selfishness through meditative techniques and compassionate love.

No matter what we try to do in life, and no matter how successful and impressive our external talents are, in the absence of love nothing is

worthwhile, and nothing will last. The kingdom of God becomes real to the extent that God's love and justice become our own.

This book is divided into three sections, the first of which takes up the question of what we mean by "unlimited love." The reader will note that at times, when I am thinking of this love in "big picture" terms as an ultimate reality underlying all that is, I use the uppercase: Unlimited Love. The second section focuses on social, scientific, and evolutionary perspectives on human altruistic motivations. A final section touches on the beginnings of the field of unlimited love research.

Human progress through the increased practice of love is the only alternative to the stagnation of egoism and conflict. Perhaps Unlimited Love is the Master Poet behind the universe, fostering love in a still incomplete and chaotic human world, and ready to change the hearts even of those who in their narrow loyalties have yet to discover the Beloved Community of all humankind. Unlimited Love may be a real energy that draws forth latent human possibilities. Are our human potentialities for love much greater than most of us think? Perhaps this is delusion and fancy, but if no such poet exists, there are still arguments to be made that the direction of human development has been toward greater cooperation and that love is an evolutionary necessity.²

Yet we still live in a world of violent ethno-nationalist conflicts, which continue to mar the prospects for the human future. Why are we so susceptible to hate-filled indoctrination and negative ideologies or beliefs that lead to intergroup hostility? This human tendency, with its deep evolutionary and historical roots, becomes particularly frightening in the context of the modern technology of mass destruction through biological, nuclear, and chemical agents.³ But such circumstances seem to point toward a potential renewal of our sense of a common humanity as the only way to achieve a salutary future for our children.

John Templeton suggests that love is not a creation of people but rather people are a creation of love. With this perspective he reminds us to be open to the metaphysical reality of love underlying and sustaining the universe and human progress.