

Love the One You're With—Homily and Reflection
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Homily

In this moment, I invite you to close your eyes or simply soften or gaze. I invite you to relax into your body as you hear this beautiful poem written by West Indian poet Derek Walcott, "Love after Love":

The time will come when, with elation you will greet yourself arriving at your own door,
in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome, and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart to itself,
to the stranger who has loved you all your life,
whom you ignored for another,
who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf, the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

Such a beautiful invitation to know ourselves as loved. The poet tells us that we have always loved ourselves, but we have forgotten that we do. The poet tells us that when we look in the mirror, we will see that we are our own beloveds. I think there is great wisdom in this poem, what it says about the love within each of us. Now, here is something I found in the writing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "You know, a lot of people don't love themselves." In these words, I hear a hint of surprise with the flavor of sadness. There is wisdom in these words, too. What does it look like when you yearn for love, to love and to be loved, and yet you don't love yourself, or don't remember that you do? Why does this happen to us, and how does it happen? What can we do about it, and why should we do anything about it?

Do you struggle to love yourself? Maybe you do. There is so much in our human-built world, so very many ways to convince us we are unlovable to anyone, even ourselves. The brilliant queer Black feminist author, professor, and social activist bell hooks has something to say about this in her year 2000 book *About Love*. I quote:

We have all heard the maxim 'If you do not love yourself, you will be unable to love anyone else.' It sounds good. Yet more often than not we feel some degree of confusion when we hear this statement. The confusion arises because most people who think they are not lovable have this perception because at some point in their lives they were socialized to see themselves as unlovable by forces outside their control.

We want to sing out, we want to be free, but too much is silencing our songs, our desires, our human possibility, common to all of us and unique in each of us. We know there are a million things to be, and yet we are so easily and relentlessly stymied as we seek to love ourselves and express our being.

Capitalist consumer culture tells us that until we achieve and maintain the right body size, possess the most fashionable garments and hairstyles, reside within perfectly complementary wall coloring, and fabric choices, and decorative objects, then we have not yet arrived, we are not all that. We are too fat or too thin, too dark or too pale, too hairy, too smelly, too unsightly. Even if we get it all right one day, fashion will shift—it always does, it's planned to keep us always wanting—and we will have to spend time and resources, not the least of which mental and emotional energy, to re-invent yet again. We are not lovable, and we may not love ourselves, if we cannot meet these expectations. In fact, all the products and methods held out to us—tantalizing us from our TVs and computer screens—they are intended to put us on a searching path for a state of existence that we can never achieve. These products and methods create us as unlovable, always yearning and never reaching the love we truly need.

Social culture constructs binaries for us all to inhabit—male or female, black or white, poor or rich, educated or not. Just some of the binaries. Of course, our actual lived experience is more diverse and much messier than these limiting binaries, these constructed boxes intended for control and domination. We are more fluid in our biology, in our presentations, in our sexualities than the discrete boxes of male and female will allow. Our physical features belie the categories of race, even while race is wielded to disempower some of us. Material wealth can make our lives easier, but it will not make us happy. We can be rich in other ways. Many of us are smart, brilliant, thoughtful, and creative but not schooled. These boxes and many others create the conditions of oppression, enabling some to have control over others. They contain and limit our real possibilities, or they discount and dismiss and even trample upon all that exceeds the boundaries of the boxes. And some of us succumb to the campaigns of self-hatred that ensue from not being able to follow or fall within the so-called norms. And thus, we do not love ourselves, we try to hide ourselves, and our special being, out lights stay under the bushel basket.

Personal decisions and actions sometimes set off consequences creating the reason we struggle to love ourselves. We have done harm, intentionally or not, to people we love. We have abused ourselves in ways that leave lingering psychic and physical marks. We have damaged our communities, destroying trust and triggering fear. We cannot forgive ourselves, because we cannot take back the hurts and the damages we have perpetrated. Such anguish may cause us to feel unlovable. It may block us from loving ourselves.

Any of these factors may inhibit our ability to love ourselves. Yet if we have love within us, as the poet says, if we need to invite loving kindness first to ourselves, why is it so hard to remember it and to do it? We all begin our lives as children, and so looking to our childhoods is another way to answer the question. I'll consider childhood with a frame that bell hooks suggests. But let me say first that I am a parent, and I am also someone's child. We are all someone's child, and I am not about to be bashing parents and blaming them—yours or mine—for struggles to love ourselves. Yet what we learn about love as children has an impact on our capacity for self-love. All our parents were someone's children, and they too had to learn how to love as best they could.

In writing of her childhood, hooks describes feeling cared for but not loved. She marks the distinction between these by inserting the reality of abuse, and she is insistent that abuse is not love. Abuse is never love. Love is always separate and apart from abuse, though care does reside with abuse. She describes it this way:

When I was a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love. I wish I could testify that I came to this awareness because of the love I felt in my life. But it was love's absence that let me know how much love mattered. I was my father's first daughter. At the moment of my birth, I was looked upon with loving kindness, cherished and made to feel wanted on this earth and in my home. To this day I cannot remember when that feeling of being loved left me. I just know that one day I was no longer precious. Those who had initially loved me well turned away. The absence of their recognition and regard pierced my heart and left me with a feeling of brokenheartedness so profound I was spellbound.

I identify strongly with her description. I have known this experience. She goes on to say that in her family she was cared for but not loved, because the care was accompanied by psychological and emotion abuse. Here are more of her words:

On any day in my family of origin I might have been given caring attention wherein my being a smart girl was affirmed and encouraged. Then, hours later, I would be told that it was precisely because I thought I was so smart that I was likely to go crazy and be put in a mental institution where no one would visit me. Not surprisingly, this odd mixture of care and unkindness did not positively nurture the growth of my spirit.

hooks's words ring so familiar to me. Now, fully adult, I know that my parents wanted me and cared for me the best they could, given that they had not known love as children. Love as hooks defines it: "a combination of trust, commitment, care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility" free of any kind of abuse. My parents did not know this kind of love, and so they did not know how to create it. The warm kitchen and the nourishing food could be suddenly bashed to bits by the anger and bitterness that always collided at the supper table.

As we enter this world, we crave love, we need love, we somehow embody and manifest love, yet in bell hooks's words, "We are not born knowing how to love anyone, either ourselves or somebody else." We crave love, but we all have to learn how to love, how to actively love. We all have to learn how to make love not a trait or a feeling but an action. Again, in her words, "As we grow we can give and receive attention, affection, and joy." But we need the right environment in which to learn to love ourselves and to love each other. Hooks says, "Self-love cannot flourish in isolation. It is no easy task to be self-loving." But when we do experience real love, "love as a combination of trust, commitment, care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility, we can work on developing these qualities or, if they are already a part of who we are, we can learn to extend them to ourselves."

We settled first into the poet's invitation to know yourselves. To remember ourselves, to feast on our own lives. In order to speak with bravest fire, live fully with generosity, we must sit compassionately at the table with ourselves, eating and drinking and smiling. In order to be in communion with all the

others with whom we wish to share the goodness of life, we must also share the welcome and the meal with ourselves. bell hooks puts it this way:

One of the best guides to how to be self-loving is to give ourselves the love we are often dreaming about receiving from others. There was a time when I felt lousy about my over-forty body, saw myself as too fat, too this, or too that. Yet I fantasized about finding a lover who would give me the gift of being loved as I am. It is silly, isn't it, that I would dream of someone else offering to me the acceptance and affirmation I was withholding from myself. This was a moment when the maxim 'You can never love anybody if you are unable to love yourself' made clear sense. And I add, 'Do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself.'

For bell hooks and for me, "Self-love is the foundation of our loving practice. Without it our other efforts to love fail." We must start by loving the one we are with. No matter what boy or girl or person we are with or for whom we long, we are always first with ourselves. When we love the one we're with, ourselves, our first companion, we take a chance on love, proving to ourselves that we can make life move again into the quiet, still spaces where we are held in a love greater than any one of us. Whether we wish to love another person deeply—lover, sibling, child, friend—we must practice loving ourselves. Whether we would seek to love our neighbors—both those who share life experiences like our own or those very different and unfamiliar—we must practice loving ourselves. Whether we would love our world enough to sacrifice our own comforts for liberation, for justice, for the earth, we must practice loving ourselves.

hooks says,

In an ideal world we would all learn in childhood to love ourselves. We would grow, being secure in our worth and value, spreading love wherever we went, letting our light shine. If we did not learn self-love in our youth, there is still hope. The light of love is always in us, no matter how cold the flame. It is always present, waiting for the spark to ignite, waiting for the heart to awaken and call us back to the first memory of being the life force inside a dark place waiting to be born—waiting to see the light.

When we love ourselves, we acknowledge the greater vitality of life from which we all arise, a source of abundance that is within us as well as between and beyond us. We humbly acknowledge our smallness and our dark within. But smallness does not make us unlovable. It is our interconnection, the spark of lively life force in us all, that calls us back to our loveliness, our lovability, our inherent worth, calls us back to each other anew. The light is always there. May it be so.

Benediction/Reflection

Our broken hearts long for the space of welcome, long for their due time and praise, long for these as they long for something more, some healing hope that is only possible in a trusting, human community that remembers. Our love flourishes when we find it in ourselves and share it among each other. Our broken hearts remember their own heart ache, and then, in community we hold the pain of each other's hearts in tender compassion. We long with all our hearts to have power in this world. Power to lift

oppression and to bend once and for all the arc of the universe towards justice. Power to liberate the earth from the heavy burden that some of our human ways of living place upon our only home, and the very ground of our being. Power to be authentically ourselves—playful, creative, expressive, and joyful, unburdened by self-doubt, self-recriminations, false self-sufficiency, and the weight of social biases and expectations. This power comes from love, the source beyond us, yet always among us and within us. Love is essential, at the core of our very being, within ourselves and in the cultural and physical worlds within which we all move. We need to feel love, be love, act love. Let us then, together, seek inward love, inward love enabling our spirits to be whole, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together “Amen.”

hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 2000.

<https://allpoetry.com/love-after-love>