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What Does Love Look Like?

WHEN A LONGTIME FRIEND of our monastery came for his yearly retreat, he described an insight about his personal relationships that had profoundly affected him over the previous year. He is a leader of a close-knit church community in an impoverished neighborhood. For as long as we've known him, he's wrestled with trying to live according to spiritual values in a tough urban culture. In fact, he inspires us as he balances prayer and spiritual discipline with charitable work in the community. "I was meditating one day," he said, "when suddenly the thought came to me, 'What does love look like?' This was really strange. The question was not, 'What is love?' or 'How should we define love?' but 'What does love look like in actual living?' Now much about my life became clearer. I saw how I must grow."

Love is admittedly a very complex reality: rich, elusive, mysterious. Yet, we speak about love. We experience love. We know how good and necessary it is to be loved and to love, and as we mature in life, we gain all sorts of insights into what the love of a human being is about. Such maturity brings with it an awareness that the definition or description of such love is not necessarily the one we find in the dictionary, much less the image conveyed by television and movies.

Another friend of ours recently spoke with us after he and

his wife celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. "When we first married, I think both of us, without even being aware of it, were seduced by the fantastic unreality of Hollywood love. We didn't understand the difference between our deep feelings for each other and true love, and this created expectations that made the first years of our marriage disappointing and rocky to say the least. For us, the real saving insight came at a weekend retreat we made here several years after we were married, and in particular during a private talk with Father Laurence. I'll never forget what he said:

"Look, at this point what you feel doesn't matter. Feelings come and go: one minute you feel like you're on fire, the next nothing, or even worse. Monks know this as well as anyone. But beyond what you feel, beyond what you know, beyond everything, is what you're *willing to do* for one another. Each of you controls that. Once you realize that you can *will* to love — *to act for the good of the other for its own sake and not simply for what you might get out of it* — then your love will mature and ripen. Then your love will really mean something. Before that, it's not really worth talking about.' That remark so startled me that it helped me take a fresh look at the whole idea of love."

At that his wife poked him playfully and quipped. "Yeah, 'Good Lord, what did we get ourselves into?'"

Understanding love requires a lot of experience, listening, and reflection, plus the realization that, like many other things in the human condition, we can never fully understand it.

What *does* love look like? Actual love is the willingness to give the other what we would like for ourselves — the golden rule — continually going out from our own limited selves toward the other, unhampered by whatever we might happen to be feeling at the moment. Jesus also teaches this:

"Now I am giving you a new command — love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love one another . . ." (John 13:36)

Jesus wasn't making a suggestion, something to apply only to our friends or to those we like. He was giving us a command, *a new commandment* — one that already presumed adherence to the great commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself" — and he backed this up with the example of his own life. His love was unrestricted, extending to all, even to those who hated him.

We might well think of dramatic situations in which the challenge of this commandment is severely put to the test: during the civil rights movement, for example, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly exhorted his marchers and demonstrators to love their oppressors, and not to respond violently to those who beat and abused them.

Such love seems almost unreasonable or impossible, yet we can see that the moral integrity manifest in such behavior is powerful and compelling. However, the breadth of this command also extends to the most seemingly banal and insignificant of events as well. This is why such love so changes and transforms us: it affects the whole of life.

*The Seeker vividly recalled wrestling with this obligation to love both during and after the visit of a particularly obnoxious guest, a monk from Europe, who had spent several days at New Skete. After the monk had left, the Seeker was helping clean the guest house with Brother James, the guest master, when he asked casually, "So what did you think of our recent guest?"*

Brother James pulled the cover sheet over the bed and replied, "Oh, let's just say that he wasn't my cup of tea," and tucked the sheet under the mattress. "Why do you ask?"

The Seeker was dusting. "I was just wondering because you had to spend so much time with him." The Seeker shook his head. "How do you do it? To tell you the truth, I can't recall when I've disliked a guest so much. He embodied everything in Orthodoxy that I loathe: narrow-mindedness, arrogance, and pharisaism. Just listening to him talk, with all his self-righteous priggishness, made me want to tell him off. But then when Father was talking in his sermon yesterday about love, all I could think of was my attitude toward this detestable monk, and how incongruous that was with real love!"

Brother James listened closely and then replied, "Incongruous? Aren't you really talking about your feelings? You know, you can't afford to confuse what you might be feeling with love. As I recall, you did a decent job of counteracting those feelings at table by being respectful, courteous, and helpful."

"Yeah, but it all felt so phony. Here I am, feeling as though I'd like to make mincemeat out of him, and all I can do is listen to the conversation politely, attend to his needs, and ask 'Would you like decaf or regular coffee?' when he was finished eating."

"But you were willing to do the right thing, weren't you? And you weren't being polite simply to deceive him," observed Brother James. "That's hardly being phony. You were doing what love was asking of you at that moment. That sort of willingness takes us into a different dimension from mere feelings. That's what love is really about."

Brother James motioned to the Seeker to check the refrigerator stock of fruit and water and then looked over the rest of the guest house quickly. Satisfied, he expanded his thought. "We feel what we feel whether we want to feel it or not, and no matter how much we'd like to feel something that we don't feel, we just don't feel it. But when we're given a command to do something, what we're commanded may

have little to do with what we feel, but it has everything to do with our intent and will. It'd be ridiculous and unjust for God to command something beyond our power to carry out. It seems that's why Jesus can speak about love as a new commandment: because it's precisely a matter of our willingness to love as he loved. C'mon, do you really imagine Jesus felt the same way about everyone? Yet I also believe that he willed to do his best for their good independent of whatever he felt. In the same way, it's within our capabilities to do this, and to ask ourselves what love looks like in our own lives."

Up to this point, while we have repeatedly emphasized the holistic character of spirituality — that spiritual life isn't a category of life, but is life itself — we have focused primarily on establishing a conscious inner life. We have seen that each of us is drawn to the spiritual journey because of a hunger that is part of our nature. If we look at ourselves honestly, whether we are believer or unbeliever, Jew or Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, or Moslem, we will recognize this desire for spiritual wholeness, for integrity, by sheer virtue of our humanness. In an effort to give the reader clearer insight into how to respond to this inner attraction, we have looked at different facets of the spiritual journey — repentance, discipleship, asceticism, sacred reading and meditation, prayerfulness, and liturgy — all of which must be cultivated if we are to grow in a balanced and integrated way.

The natural result of such growth, however, is not a closing in on ourselves, but a movement outward, toward others. This is why we want to focus now more explicitly on the outward manifestations of healthy spiritual living, and on the essential link they have with the inner life.

The more we mature spiritually, the more we consciously try to harmonize all of our actions with the transcendent aspects of life. The inner disciplines put us in touch with the

absolute reality we call God. But what is more important than the name we give to it is the recognition that this reality is absolutely and ultimately benevolent toward us. This inspires us, in turn, to pursue an ever-expanding attitude of benevolence toward others.

Benevolence — from the Latin *benevolentia*, meaning *good will* — means a universal disposition of good will toward others, regardless of external circumstances. We will never achieve this automatically, or by virtue of the way we spontaneously feel toward others; it takes the repeated, conscious decision or act of our will to make this virtue a part of our life. It is very hard work, and a continuous struggle, yet it is the only real foundation of healthy and lasting relationships.

*As they walked up the hill from the guest house, the Seeker remarked to Brother James, "I think I understand what you're saying, yet somehow I've always had difficulties picturing love as a willpower thing. I guess what bothers me is that it makes love sound so antiseptic, almost clinical and cold."*

*"I don't see why at all," responded Brother James. "Look, you know me well enough to know that I'd never minimize the fact that human beings are emotional, feeling beings. God forbid! But that's not the primary focus when we're speaking about love. What's confusing you is that love and feelings, while separate realities, usually go together. Granted, we don't have a thermometer to indicate how much feeling accompanies the exercise of our wills, but it's still true that some sort of human feeling usually colors our choices and decisions. And true love, a deliberate, thoughtful, and habitual willingness to act right, still carries with it all kinds of feelings. Usually, they're pleasant, invigorating, pleasurable, affirming, encouraging — in some way, life-enhancing. But they can also be just the opposite, as when we experience disappointment in love or are angry with a loved one, or when*

*we feel stung by a friend's careless remark. Still, usually we wouldn't say we no longer love the person, even though our feelings are hurt. True love is more than just feelings."*

SO WHAT EXACTLY is this love? For all of the ink spilled on love throughout the centuries, we are surprisingly vague about it. The ancient Greeks had many different words for what we call love, each word touching on a different aspect of the reality. *Agápé* means the benevolent love of a person as a human being, *agápêtos* is the beloved, *agapênor* is to love in a strong, virile way, *phília* is love as friendship and affection, *éros* is driving, passionate love, *ímeros* is the craving and obsession one has for someone who is present, *storgé* is the love one has for blood relatives, *philóstorgos* is tender love and affection, just to mention some. English is far less nuanced; the single word love is used for all of these and more, often in ways that are foreign to the essence of the reality.

Most Christians have heard Saint Paul's immortal passage on love:

If I speak with the eloquence of men and of angels, but have no love, I become no more than blaring brass or clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of foretelling the future and hold in my mind not only all human knowledge, but the very secrets of God, and if I have that absolute faith which can move mountains, but have no love, I amount to nothing at all. . . .

This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience — it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep

account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it shares the joy of those who live by the truth.

Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. (1 Corinthians 13:1-7)

The problem is, this passage is so familiar (and, we should add, frequently reflected on so superficially), that it often ends up carrying all the power of a greeting card. "We've heard it all before: there's nothing new here!" We tend to think of love as a kind of theoretical ideal, an abstract concept, which perhaps sounds good, but meanwhile our smugness hides from us the actual, life-giving experience of practicing authentic love. Love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling toward the thought of humanity in general. It is easy to "love" the poor and homeless, the suffering, from the comfort of one's home, but how about the less spectacular, everyday love of the people we actually live with, that normally lacks such lofty feelings?

Brother Christopher made this point responding to a question Brother Gregory asked in novice class about how society tends to misuse the word "love." "Hasn't it ever struck you how casually we talk about love? We hear the word everywhere so much that we've come to use it carelessly — even to trivialize it. Who doesn't just *love* the latest rage in fashion . . . this stand-up comedian . . . this mystery . . . ? More and more, 'love' is *what we feel* about something, rather than our deliberate attitude and conduct toward others. Rampant emotional immaturity, blatant narcissism, and broken relationships in our society have resulted in a great deal of confusion about the true nature of love."

He leaned back in his chair and shrugged philosophically. "Do we think we know what love's all about simply because we say we love, because we've got some vague notion or

strong feeling of love? Perhaps we think love is our feeling for those whom we like, respect, or need very much. All that does is reduce love to its dictionary definition: taking pleasure in someone or something, a matter of positive good feelings. That's not what the New Testament is talking about. Obviously such feelings are an important part of life, but they come and go, unbidden, like the wind. They certainly don't constitute an act of the will, and they may well end up controlling us."

Making a living, planning our next vacation, having fun with our pet, looking for a good buy on a new car — these and other concerns all merit our considerable attention. Our days are literally crammed with things to attend to, and many of them we might take genuine pleasure in doing; we "love" them. Indeed, who doesn't "love" getting a new car, or "love" playing with their dog?

First, we want to make it clear that here we use "love" solely with regard to other people. For this is the principal meaning of love — what the New Testament calls *agápē* — *the constant willing of good toward others*, to identify with one's neighbor so that we no longer treat him or her as an "object," but indeed as an other self.

Second, though we may indeed desire to know God as the one from whom we have come and to whom we shall return, the only way we can authentically and healthily show our love of God is through the infinite network of human relationships that make up our lives as flesh-and-blood creatures. Saint John the Evangelist puts it in clear and startling terms:

No one has ever seen God. Yet as long as we love one another, God remains in us and his love is brought to perfection in us. . . . God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God, and God remains in them. . . . If someone

says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love the brother he can see cannot love God whom he cannot see. (1 John 4:12, 16b, 20; translation New Skete)

The message of Jesus and the New Testament is unambiguous: love must extend to all. There is no one we are permitted not to love. The manner in which we love the various "others" that make up our life — our spouse, our closest friend, a casual business acquaintance, the person sitting next to me on the bus — will vary according to the nature of each relationship. More important, acting for the good of others can and must transcend our romantic or sentimental feelings and affection, what we ordinarily seem to think love is. Furthermore, this is within our power to accomplish, by virtue of our free will.

This is the central struggle of an integrated spiritual practice: to will the highest good for each person we meet, without exception. Our attitude and actions must be based on this decision and intent to do good for the other — for all others — whatever we may happen to feel at the moment. Well then, what does this love look like?

**I**F SOMEONE WERE to ask us, "How do you show your love?" many of us might not be sure how to answer. We lack the straightforward assurance of how to speak about the love we have for others. We know, for example, that part of religion is about being good to one another, yet why is it that we often grow self-conscious in the very presence of the word "love"? Are we embarrassed, or do we sense that we fall short? Maybe we tell ourselves, "Oh, they know how I really

feel about them," while failing to demonstrate the truth of our love?

"What I want to know is, how are we supposed to communicate this understanding of love to others?" asked Sister Helen in novice class. "I'm thinking of a conversation I had not too long ago, in which a woman stunned me by saying, 'What do you know about love? After all, you're a nun.'" Sister Helen laughed at the recollection, then continued, "So many people today seem unable to take seriously a love that doesn't express itself erotically, and so they miss out on anything monastic life might be able to teach them. The irony (at least if I understand Father Laurence correctly) is that monastic life is supposed to be a school of love, which insists on the primacy of love over everything else in spiritual life."

"That's right, which is why I'm not sure there's any point in arguing about it," replied Brother Christopher. "Either people will see it in the way we live, in the very concrete way we are, or they won't. But the person who's thoughtful isn't going to write off the witness of love from a person like Staretz Silouan, the highly respected Orthodox monk, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, for example, simply because they were celibates. They'll recognize in them a force that transcends any particular state in life, which expresses itself concretely, in all sorts of simple acts of love."

Brother Christopher hesitated. "Yet that said, I do think we monks and nuns would do well to think about how we actually do express our love, instead of simply presuming that it's understood. At times, I get the impression that we're awkward and embarrassed about this, and so take each other for granted. For example, because of the sexual taboos that have surrounded monasticism, I think many of us are too stiff and uptight with each other, afraid that our friendliness and good

will are apt to be misunderstood. Our love needs to be chaste, but it should also be human as well.”

Brother Gregory added, “I think another reason people might be skeptical when monks and nuns talk about love is that we stay in the monastery, and so don’t go out into the world to serve in active ministry.”

“No doubt that’s so,” agreed Brother Christopher, “but still, learning how to love is all that this life’s about. It’s just that we do it here, in this particular context. People today often don’t see the relationship monastic life has with the overall health of the church, that monks and nuns serve the church and society in one way, while clergy and the laity serve in another. Each group needs the other, because no one individual or group can do everything. Each of us must make choices as to how we’re going to love and serve, and then do that to the best of our ability. Regardless of our state in life, the issue is how authentically we love.”

Brother Christopher continued, “But it will always show in our relationships. There’s a principle to keep in mind that I remember coming across in Dorotheos of Gaza, a sixth-century abbot from Palestine. He told his monks to imagine a circle with a center point, noting that the center point would naturally be the same distance from any point on the circumference of the circle. ‘The circle represents the world,’ he said, ‘and the center point, God.’ Then he told them to imagine straight lines drawn from the edge of the circle to the center. ‘These represent the lives of human beings.’ Dorotheos then pointed out that to move toward the center, to God, the task of each of our lives, is equally to move closer to one another. ‘The closer we come to God,’ he said, ‘the closer we become to one another, and the closer we are to one another, the closer we are to God.’ Regardless of the context, the other is our path to God.

“I bring this up because often we’re unconscious of people around us. We don’t realize the implications of taking them seriously as independent human beings. We don’t intend not to love, but can we really say we love without being consciously and truly present to the other?” The novices listened intently. “For example, when someone doesn’t hold our interest at the moment, when we give him or her only scant attention or a quick brush-off, our relationship to that person is careless and mindless. When we allow ourselves to be preoccupied with other things, we fail to realize that we’re being distracted from the person right in front of us, the one we are supposed to love, the immediate key to our enlightenment. Our mind is adrift, and so is our love.”

Sometimes this syndrome even happens with those we are closest to, whom we would never wish to hurt. In not giving them the full attention of benevolent love, our lack of awareness allows hidden emotions to affect our behavior. How often does submerged anger, the fight I had with my boss this afternoon, for example, script my present behavior, controlling and manipulating me simply because of my careless mindlessness? If I am unconscious that I am held in the grip of anger and a bruised ego, I can easily find myself lashing out at my spouse without even being aware of where the anger is coming from. Instead of being in the present, intent on the tenor of our relationship with him or her, I end up “not myself,” stuck in the past. After such a scene, “What does love look like?” becomes a mocking refrain. It certainly doesn’t look like my disordered attitudes and behavior.

It is not easy to work constantly at being aware of ourselves. To leave the past, with its history of emotional turmoil, in the past, staying conscious of the actual interaction and circumstances we are engaged in right now, in the present, is hard

work. Without such an alert consciousness, we will repeatedly drift into unconscious ways of acting, habitually making the same mistakes, and being chronically unhappy. When we correctly and wisely will to love, we progressively leave behind the sense of isolation brought about by exaggerated individualism and self-protection. Our intentional thoughts and acts of love create a further readiness to love within us, which in turn, enables us to form the habit of loving, to practice the art of loving. This fosters our own spiritual integration. It makes us better able to give our best in each situation of life, to change things for the better. This is the challenge of a fully human life, of an authentic and spiritual inner life, and the real meaning of happiness.

As our awareness expands and our relationships change for the better, we will find that we are moving toward our goal of knowing and experiencing the creative, universal, and unifying love of God. A monastic tale from our community is related to this idea of being awake:

Once, a young man who had traveled throughout the world came to the monastery to speak with the abba. After his arrival, while they were at table, the abba asked the young man, "So tell me, what have you learned in your travels?"

The young man looked intently at the abba, and after a short pause replied, "I've learned that the whole world is asleep!"

At this, the abba burst out laughing and slapped his thigh. "You may stay as long as you like."

Before we can profitably envision what love looks like, how it shows itself, we have to be awake to all the particular contexts in which it can be expressed.

SO WHAT DOES real love look like? Obviously we can appeal to Christ as a living example of this love, recalling memorable encounters such as his defense of the woman caught in sin, his healing of the paralytic, and his forgiving his executioners. But we must also go much further. What does it look like today in my own life? All talk of love will remain coldly theoretical *to us* unless we actively work to make our love real in the furnace of daily living.

We cannot know that we have truly loved, or be sure that others know that we love them, without putting a face on love by our concrete behavior. We will not know what love looks like unless we grab hold of opportunities to demonstrate our love tangibly. We may think that we are putting love at the center of our spiritual lives. We might read, preach, discourse, or protest about how important it is. But invisible love is, when all is said and done, no love at all. If it is not, here and now, the cornerstone of our actions and attitudes, it will wither away.

By trying to visualize how love can embody itself every day with everyone we meet, and then repeatedly acting upon that, we will soon come to understand with our own insights what the love looks like that Saint Paul described to the Corinthians. We can expand and personalize Paul's insight by struggling to perceive and reflect on the new and infinite ways our love can show itself in our own lives.

Committing ourselves to work for love creatively in all of our relationships does not mean that we now have to look at the world through rose-colored glasses. Love is realistic, not sentimental. We naturally have our own likes and dislikes; we will not *feel* absolutely the same about everyone we meet, nor take to everyone equally; and finally, we will certainly have our share of legitimate disagreements with others. Because



we are human, conflicts will arise. Because we are human, we will fail again and again. But true love always goes deeper. There are proper and positive ways of thinking and acting in every situation: we can learn how to love, how to will what is good for the other, in the midst of any scenario, no matter what our personal feelings might happen to be. As a saying has it, when we find ourselves in a boat with our worst enemy, will we drill a hole in his side of the boat? We can search for the truth of the matter at hand, for example, by being open and direct, responding with consideration and tact in a manner that shows respect without compromising our integrity.

How can this possibly be? Isn't it simply naïve to presume such a thing? Yes, it is, if we limit love to feelings. But once we realize that love is a deliberate act of our mind and will, of good will toward the other, then real love toward all is possible. The very act of resolving to love, no matter what our emotional state, is the crucible and school of love.

*The Seeker vividly recalled a crucial period during his novitiate when Father Laurence was addressing the topic of love repeatedly — in community meetings, in his teaching and preaching, in various conferences he gave — trying to illuminate the many different ways love needs to express itself in our lives. For the Seeker, an insight began to come together for him in a memorable way toward the end of a Saturday evening community meeting. Father had been speaking about the inclusiveness of love.*

*“This is why love is a catholic reality, extending to everyone,” Father Laurence stressed. “‘Catholic’ is from the Greek *katá hólón*, which means ‘whole,’ ‘entire,’ ‘meant for all.’ Being catholic in outlook is the opposite of being defensive, uptight, or insecure. It is neither aggressive nor suspicious, but confident, generous, open, and sincere. It has room for everyone. This is certainly what love is all*

*about. It's open to life, recognizing in it the opportunity to become truly happy in a way we could never imagine.*

*“Since true love seeks to become liberated from the sway of our feelings, a good place to begin observing it is from the perspective of each person we meet. What does our love look like to him or her? Think about that as you leave tonight.”*

*As the Seeker lay in his bed that night, he reflected at length on Father Laurence's question. It was some time before he drifted off to sleep. He had a dream. He found himself sitting at a small table in the midst of a vast, empty field, with enormous mountains in the distance. Several other monks and nuns were seated at the table as well, listening to what he soon came to realize was a continuation of that evening's discussion. In the midst of them a voice was speaking, and while he realized it was the voice of Father Laurence, the monk didn't look like Father at all. His complexion was weathered and darkened from the sun, and he was dressed in a plain monastic tunic. His voice was calm, and though he seemed to have an accent, no one had difficulty understanding him. He was talking about love.*

*“For example,” the monk said, “what does our love look like to the black, to the white, to the Chicano? What about to the gay, or the straight? Will the Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish person with whom we are dealing observe an honest benevolence in us? How expansive is our love when we're racist, sexist, or homophobic; when we despise someone because of his personality, preferences, or opinions; when we avoid him because of his idiosyncrasies or eccentricities? What does our love look like to the person whom we ignore as a nonperson, without at least an occasional nod or smile? . . .”*

*In his dream the Seeker saw the monk turn from side to side, calmly looking at them. “What about those who don't love us, who have no real interest in us, who couldn't care less about our life? What does our love look like to them? How about the one who is jealous of us, who resents or despises us and tears us down? Would that person, if he looked, recognize anything like love in us? On the*

other hand, what does our love look like to the person who has a crush on us, but for whom we feel nothing special? In each of these situations, love can pierce through the mist and fog of feelings to show itself: using common sense, wisdom, and skill in willing the very best for each of these. Do you do this?

"This demands relentless alertness and self-discipline. So then, doesn't love look like self-control? It's able to handle the unexpected emotional turmoil that arises when life doesn't go our way. Instead of giving free reign to our emotions, we immediately exercise the great power of deliberate love, moving past our agitated emotions and feelings to size up the actual reality more clearly and objectively.

A large flock of birds flew by overhead, bringing in their wake a brisk wind. The monk continued, "Love is peaceful. It is able to resist the temptation to tear others down with gossip, envy, and resentment. It is never threatened or defensive; it shows self-possession; it always delights in the goodness of another."

No one else spoke. Each of them was listening to every word, and it struck the Seeker as odd that despite the rush of wind they had no trouble hearing him. The monk didn't seem surprised by this at all, and felt no need to raise his voice, but continued in the same tone.

"There's nothing superhuman in this; it begins with our willing it from our hearts, then flowers when we conscientiously work at it. Because love is realistic, it focuses us on the need for change in our own life, instead of self-righteously pointing a finger at others, habitually judging them, labeling them, writing them off. Love admits and understands its own imperfections, that we're all together in this human condition, and thus it seeks to look compassionately on the faults of others. Such self-disciplined love lets go of past hurts — forgiving from the heart — instead of nursing grudges that give hatred an entrance into our lives. It's independent and liberated from what another does to me. Isn't it wonderful when we encounter a person

who appreciates us for who we are, instead of as a threat to their self-esteem? Love desires to do this for others."

The monk's gaze was steady, though as the Seeker continued to look at him he began to disappear, as did those around him. Suddenly the scene changed, and the Seeker found himself in a university auditorium, standing before a group of adults sitting in the seats, raising their hands and asking questions. The Seeker heard his voice begin to say, "Love? . . . love looks like generosity. It spends itself willingly (and wisely) for others, be it with time, attention, money, or simple concern." Where were the words coming from, he thought? But his voice kept speaking, and he relaxed. "Usually we associate generosity with people of substantial wealth, philanthropists whose fortune puts them in a better position to help others, but generosity is much more than donating large sums of money to the needy, no matter how noble and important such efforts are. Generosity has to do with giving — not only money to charity — but with the giving of ourselves, from the heart. That's the root of any work of generosity, whether it be volunteering at the local hospital or holding the door for someone, extending hospitality to a guest, or offering the gift of your full attention.

"A generous love is expansive. It is willing to be flexible and inclusive, not rigid. It gives freely for the sake of others, instead of always counting the cost and effort. Parental love is our primary experience of generosity: parents give of their very substance for the child, without making the child's gratitude a precondition. So love looks like a giver.

"Love looks like gratitude, too. It knows how to receive the love of others graciously, without embarrassment or discomfort, for it understands that we are always receiving. Love is not so presumptuous or proud as to suppose that it can do without the love of others; and so it appreciates even the smallest expression of concern from another. Love gives and receives freely, without expectation or demand. It recognizes that no price could ever be attached to it, that there can be no life without it. It shows appreciation."

The dream continued, and while the Seeker was aware as he slept that it was a dream, he was so fascinated by the fantastic nature of it that he wouldn't allow himself to awaken. Instead, he continued to listen to himself speak to the class in what now seemed to be the same measured tone he had heard the monk use. "Love looks like friendliness. It gives to others the benefit of the doubt in favor of goodness, rather than suspiciously presuming hidden agendas. Though it is not naïve, it inspires others to a similar goodness by the example of its simple, straightforward lack of guile. Such friendliness is not a charade, sporting a lacquered smile meant only to hide its true intentions. It sincerely intends and evokes the good in others.

"A friendly person reflects a largesse of heart with enough room for those who are not part of his or her group, society, or religion. He or she seeks avenues of understanding that lead people together rather than ideologies that keep them separated. When we rise above purely partisan concerns, we embody openness and goodness that engenders healing and trust." And the Seeker woke up with a start.

During his early morning ritual of washing and getting coffee, the dream remained vividly in his mind, so after making his morning meditation, the Seeker recorded the dream in his journal and continued reflecting: "Love looks like being interested in those it meets, especially those with whom it is on intimate terms. It is fascinated with the beloved, wants to know all it can about the person, dedicates time to further the relationship, establishes an open context where mutual respect, insight, and creativity thrive.

"What passion we can bring to a subject that we are taken up with, the research involved, combing the library for every last word on the subject! The sense of wonder it evinces in us drives us to understand everything we can about it. What happens when we bring such passion into our human relationships (and here we are not speaking of sexual passion)? Is this not the basis of real friendship? Don't friends enjoy being in each other's company? Given the uniqueness of each relationship and personality, how much richer

life becomes when we show genuine interest in everyone we encounter, when we focus on them and listen!"

NO HUMAN BEING is totally devoid of love, but our capacity to love is substantially greater than what we show others. Yes, it takes courage and persistence to expand the scope of our love. The ways in which it becomes manifest in our lives are infinite, if we allow ourselves to use creativity, spontaneity, and ingenuity. But love is not abstract: it must be concrete. Perhaps this will mean massaging your spouse's back or feet after a difficult day at work, or paying attention to a recap of his or her day. Maybe it will be giving a hand to a busy colleague at work or sending a thank-you note. Small things? Yes, but each has the look of love.

We've gotten to know the parcel post driver who makes regular deliveries to our monastery. Occasionally his wife will send him a card in care of us, to surprise him in the middle of the day with an expression of her love. It was not surprising to hear this man say, "I'm married to a wonderful woman; she's my very best friend!"

Love sees what is needed, what is missing, and seeks to respond. It is true contemplation and thoughtful perception of the other, whether God or our neighbor. This is why love is the supreme characteristic of the interior, contemplative life, and not just in a monastery. We cannot hope to act correctly — lovingly — without first facing what reality is asking of us right now. Love is the root of every virtue and good. Love has no limits. This is why love is not only the source of our humanity, it is the crown of the mystical life: in our striving to become conscious of the reality of all realities, love opens for us the ultimate, infinite reality that permeates everything, what we call God.