

2016 U3A Course based on

Dancing With the Unknown

A Book about FEELINGS and the Everyday Experience of MIND and SOUL

Session 10 – August 1, 2016

Chapter 11 in this book is called *Everyday Love*, which I hope suggests the idea that the love we have been talking about in this Course is more than a biological principle – it is the most practical, down-to-earth, business of living that we experience every day. As an introduction I want to revisit some of the main points that I've raised earlier in the Course that underpin our ability to experience everyday love.

Love is such an all-embracing term it will elicit many different meanings. Because each of us generates our own individual meaning in our feelings and our thoughts there will be as many different feelings about love as there are people, but there will also be a lot of common ground, which is the **shared meaning** I was talking about in the last session. We yearn for this shared meaning because it establishes the most satisfying kind of connection or mutual understanding. It occurs at many different levels from an agreement with a shop assistant that you have given her the correct amount of money to the deepest communion with an old friend when you both know exactly what the other is thinking and, almost, what that person is feeling as well.

Each of our minds consists of many different emotions operating at the subconscious level and many different thoughts, which are conscious, of course, but it is the middle section of our mind – our feelings – that enables us to attune to one another. Attunement is another word that is used to describe the **connection** that begins with mother and baby and shapes the mind of young persons throughout their development. I hope I have emphasised the importance of connection because that is essentially what our mind does. Attunement would not be possible if we could not experience our own feelings because we recognise the feelings of others by feeling them ourselves. This involves our whole body as well as our brain as I have been saying. Empathy is an incredible property of the human mind, the value of which could not be overstated. And compassion flows from that as well.

The beginning of my book has been revised since we started the Course and it now reads: 'A baby is born into the world, alive and well. What a wonder aliveness is and how precious! Mother clasps baby tightly to her bosom and feels the pulse of life in the baby's heartbeat and her own. This is the fundamental connectedness we call love.' And it goes on to say that this is a book about love and why it is a biological necessity. I like the word, 'aliveness,' which Andreas Weber uses also in his book *The Biology of Wonder*. What I'm saying meets up with his book around the fact that this idea of a subjective mind that makes meaning of what it is doing is a property of all living things, which is why we need connections with the natural world to keep our minds healthy. It is our alienation from the natural world and neglect of our environment that is making people sick as we search to control everything in technology-driven lives of 'joyless urgency' as Marilynne Robinson put it in her latest book of essays, *The Givenness of Things*.

A book I have just come across by Laurence Heller and Aline LaPierre called *Healing Developmental Trauma* begins with the words: 'It is the experience of being in connection that fulfils the longing we have to feel fully alive. An impaired capacity for connection, to self and others, and the ensuing

diminished **aliveness**, are the hidden dimensions that underlie most psychological and many physiological problems.’ In this Course and in my book I am drawing attention to the fact that we all have a certain amount of trauma in our lives and even if this has not been severe enough to warrant medical attention, it will have had some impact on the way one’s mind works, particularly with regard to our connectedness.

A key part of the physiology of our connecting process is our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). It’s the involuntary part of the nervous system which links all our organs and parts of our body to the brain stem at the bottom of the brain. The subconscious process that keeps our internal changes and our external relationships reasonably well matched is called **self-regulation**. The arousing ANS speeds things up as required and the soothing ANS steadies them and slows them down so we can rest and enjoy our relationships.

I talked quite a lot about how we cope with stress because that is a crucial part of the process of mind. What we are trying to connect with keeps changing and we have to be adapting all the time. Our mind and body are naturally equipped to do this, but often we don’t use the resources available in a very efficient way. This could be because we worry about stress and try to control things that aren’t really meant to be under our control. Stephen Porges is one of the medical scientists that I draw on heavily and his way of explaining the **stress response** is an important part of the Course.

There are three levels of stress response. The most primitive is the freeze and we still have those parts of our vagus nerve to do that, but it’s very much a last resort. The next level is the fight-or-flight reaction, which we often employ in subtle ways such as starting an argument or avoiding the issue. The top level, which is unique to humans, is loving social engagement, for which we have a new part of our vagus nerve that enables us to hold one another in a close embrace without fear – in the trust of love.

I described the basic function of mind as it applies to all living things as a process of **being and belonging**, which means preserving our autonomy as individuals at the same time as being connected to the world around us in a meaningful way – that is a way that satisfies our psychological and physical needs. The mind of simple organisms, even without a brain, is trying to do this too; we have the largest brain and the most complex ways of doing it, which I have described as exquisite and truly remarkable – the magic of social engagement, for example. My website is called Biosong because I imagine that life ‘sings’ and we are all invited to sing along with it. The metaphor of music has a lot to teach us about the process of mind – the way it flows, the alternating sound and silence, and the way it makes us move.

Aliveness has its essence in movement. The living things that move most obviously are all animals with a brain and nervous system, but in plants the movement occurs internally and is seen in spectacular flowers and fruit. There is an American philosopher who was a dancer in her early life who has written fascinating books about movement including *Putting Movement Into Your Life*, which I got as an e-book just recently and have really enjoyed reading. Her name is Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. I have tried to emphasise the role of our body in the workings of our mind – the fact that the way we sit and stand and move alters our feelings, thoughts and emotions.

She says our minds work because our bodies move – to be dead is to be unmoving, without heartbeat or breath. They are the basic movements – the rhythms of life. We have individual styles of movement and habits we develop and these are part of our thinking and feeling. The habits of our minds are formed in our bodies and brains. She laughs when people say we have five senses; if we didn’t have more than five senses we would be dead. You might recall the book *Embodied* by Christopher Eccleston that I brought in near the start of the Course in which 15 different senses were described. These include hunger, pain, itch, the need to go to the toilet and of great importance are our proprioceptive senses that enable us to keep our balance and move about.

Sheets-Johnstone explains our kinesthetic sense whereby we explore and experience our kinetic dynamics – our individual ‘movement pulse’ she calls it. She suggests, not only that we move whenever we can to keep our mind active and maintain that feeling of aliveness, but that we vary our movements, try different ways of walking and getting in and out of a chair, explore the way we push things or pull them and try to get in touch with how our body feels as it moves. Physical exercise has been shown to be just about the most effective therapy for treating depression.

The seven primary, instinctual emotions I have described are the foundation stones of our emotional mind and one of them is **play**. Jaak Panksepp devoted a lot of his research to the importance of play; it really is one of the most influential emotions working with seeking and care to give us this wonderful human mind. We will come back to talk more about movement and play as we continue with the Course.

BREAK

Because the word, love, has such enormous breadth of meaning it’s easy to miss its everyday familiarity. It seems to me we are never without love as we try to balance our being and belonging in the face of everyday stress and to satisfy our need for social engagement and, where possible, shared meaning. Whether we notice it or not and whether we express it depends on where we choose to direct our attention.

As I said earlier, I think there are three different levels at which loving relationships can be formed. The most obvious and straightforward is my relationship with another person or even with an object or activity that feels pleasing at the time. The level above that – on which my ability to love others depends – is the love I feel for myself, which is much trickier. And above that is the love that defines my relationship with the larger-than-self kind of authority that I am calling the unknown. Usually, when we strike problems in our relationships, we put all our effort into the lowest level, trying to sort it out with another person, but the problem may also stem from a felt lack of love at one or both of the higher levels. I felt I had no love in my life and I hated myself during those dark times and my recovery from this could not be negotiated solely with other people. I learned to love others as I learned to love myself in a healthy way and this happened when I had developed a better relationship with the unknown.

I have also been taken in by some of the common misconceptions about love that Erich Fromm writes about in his book, *The Art of Loving*, which I introduced a while back. The first is that one simply ‘falls’ into it without any effort, which is what it feels like because romantic attachments are so strong and unpredictable. The second is that this happened so easily we can assume that these feelings will last for ever of their own accord. Thirdly we think mostly about being loved rather than about our responsibility towards others and fourthly, in our education, we would rather learn about other things that are supposedly more practical and useful. The result is that we take love for granted and forget to put effort into it every day. Love might be the greatest mystery, but it is also something we do – and need to keep doing. Love is a verb as well as a noun.

Learning the art of loving was the theme of Fromm’s book and we can only do this by practising it in our lives. We learn as we go along. The intention and the effort that it requires is seen first in the way a new mother relates to her child who has come into the world with an obvious expectation of being loved. The words and actions are rudimentary at first, but the feelings of connectedness are sufficient for both parties to learn what it means to express love and to feel that you are loved. Both parties also learn the important practical lesson that love does not fix all your problems. As I said earlier it is the ideal state of being and belonging, towards which we are attracted, but that ideal can’t be realised in everyday life. Love is not just one of our emotions; it is something beyond

that which exists to support life whether you or I have feelings about it or not. But it will never reach a perfect state in our everyday life.

Fear is one of the primary emotions and it interacts with love all the time. As I said we need fear to hone our mind, but too much fear blocks our capacity to love as Jerry Jampolsky famously explained more than 30 years ago in his classic book *Love is Letting Go of Fear*. Our fear of uncertainty is strongest when it concerns our deep desire to be loved and much of the stress we experience emanates from this. There is always tension in our experience of love because it combines certainty and uncertainty at each of the three levels of relationship: how certain can I be that you love me; or that I can feel love for myself; or that the unknown could possibly provide me with love? A large part of everyday love, learned only by experiencing it, is to develop a trust in love itself – a belief that it will prevail, even when difficult circumstances arise.

In a practical sense the experience of love begins with the realisation that it is not, primarily, something you receive; it is something that you give. You can't grasp it or bottle it or even disown it because it exists whether we want to utilise it or not and even when your attention is elsewhere. But somehow you can offer it outwards from yourself towards others if you make up your mind to do so. And even more strangely the more of it you give the more there seems to be in your own life. Giving is not the same as giving up something; in fact it's a sign that you have enough to spare. '*Not he who has much is rich, but he who gives much*' as Fromm put it. I choose to say I love the unknown and my soul often tells me that the unknown loves me, which gives me strength to love myself and ultimately to love another person. My feelings about love have a tendency to grow to include more of my world. I don't really understand this, but I know it happens, though not at a constant level – it waxes and wanes. I have to accept this as part of the reality of my lived experience.

Of course, it is not a 'rose garden.' All the different forms of doubt and suffering that I am going to talk about in a later session occur in my life despite what I believe to be an abundance of love. The everyday experience of mind and soul is no picnic because the intimacy and connection provided by love still honours all the differences between two people – they are still there to prickle and cause stress. Each of us has an autonomous *will* that does not necessarily align with the desires of others nor with the common good. Rollo May emphasised the interdependence of love and will in his book of that name (*Love and Will*). He said we need both and that without love our will simply becomes manipulation, but by the same token, love without any will would be rather empty and diffuse.

We obtain the confidence to love others from being comfortable with ourselves, feeling that we are well enough endowed to give love away. As Rollo May also said there is no contradiction between love of others and the love of yourself and selfishness stems more often from a lack of self-love. When I didn't feel that I was loved I did not have much to give to others. If the stories we create diminish our self-worth they weaken our natural ability to love.

The noise that Tolle talked about that is generated by the egoic self is a major obstacle to experiencing love. An egoic kind of relationship is driven by selfish wanting, which includes the ego's favourite tools of criticising and complaining, or by the only real alternative it knows, which is indifference. Even hatred, which is a passion, is not so much an enemy of love as indifference. It is the abrogation of the primary, instinctual emotion that is called *Caring*. Perhaps one can be indifferent in a carefree and benign kind of way, but the risk is that this denigrates and denies the vitality of our mind.

There is no better reminder of one's aliveness than the feeling of falling in love. It is a magical combination of lightness and strength whereby your physiology seems to be optimised so that your heart actually sings, your spirits soar and a smile seems to have been planted on your face. There is no better example of the upside of stress than the time you spend exploring interesting congruencies and differences with a new lover. Most people writing about love emphasise the positive effects that go with social engagement including the pleasure of shared meaning, the

bonding influence of oxytocin and the warm glow we get from the soothing ANS. In her book, *Love 2.0*, Barbara Fredrickson calls each experience of love a moment of ‘positivity resonance’ and she adds to this the idea that an accumulation of positive emotions is the best way to ‘broaden-and-build’ our minds and our lives.

The trouble with romantic love is that it doesn’t become a long-lasting asset for us unless it extends more deeply into the depths of our mind that include our soul. Love is such a fundamental aspect of life that its experience at a superficial level can never do it justice. Eckhart Tolle points out that the heights of romance are intensifications of just the kind of reactive exchanges that our ego delights in so they will not satisfy us at a deeper level or for a long time.

The noted Jungian author, Robert Johnson, wrote several related books about being male (*He*), being female (*She*) and about relationships (*We: Understanding the Psychology of Romantic Love*) that influenced me greatly many years ago. Using the mythical story of *Tristan and Iseult*, he wrote that romantic love teaches us an important lesson through its superficiality. Tristan’s mother died on the day he was born and he grew up in a man’s world. When he fell in love with Iseult they drank a love potion that turned their world into a beautiful fantasy, but he was never able to convert this energy into a deeper spiritual connection because he tried to possess her with his egoic self. It is a complex and ultimately tragic story immortalised by Wagner’s opera with its particular form of discord known as the ‘Tristan chord’ that has been called the most splendid expression of unrequited love. Johnson said that Tristan did not ‘heed his soul’ and in the end it ‘snares him through his selfish pride.’

The everyday experience of love is not generally a state of bliss, but it is the most deeply meaningful and satisfying experience of all. Johnson wrote about a ‘stirring the oatmeal’ kind of love, which is what I am calling everyday love. Making porridge with your mate or washing the dishes in a homely kind of companionship and talking about anything at all without necessarily coming to any conclusion – these are elements of everyday love. Yet, at the same time, love is ‘the power within us that affirms and values another human being as he or she is . . . at its very essence it is an appreciation – a recognition of value’ in Robert Johnson’s words. There is more I want to say about value later on.

Everyday love has in common with stress the fact that it is an integral component of life and it includes pain as well as joy. By acknowledging love we are saying that the connectedness is stronger than the differences that are creating the tension. Doing this also opens an avenue for connecting with people whom you feel are your enemies or whom you dislike or avoid because they criticise and annoy you. Weighed down by ego your mind sees only their faults, but buoyed by love it is possible to see that they also have good in them. Acts of forgiveness and the ancient idea of praying for your enemies are the most reliable ways of loosening the hold of one’s troublesome ego. I conclude from this that there is something in our souls that wants us to bring the good to the fore. Trying to bring out the best in others is the simplest and most successful way of bringing out the best in yourself.

This is exemplified in the power of the smile, which is perhaps the simplest and truest manifestation of everyday love. There is extensive research showing that every aspect of interpersonal life is enhanced by the behaviour of smiling, whether it is in conducting business, coping with stress, overcoming obstacles, relieving suffering or just having fun. When you smile you feel better and you bring out the good in others as well as yourself.

I have come to believe it is my biological birthright to know that I am loved and that this makes it possible for me to engage with the world from a position of worthiness much of the time. On a day when that is not happening I have learned to address my relationship with the unknown in the first instance and thus be a little kinder towards myself. Even a glimmer of renewed hope resulting from that helps me to connect and share meaningfully with other people once again. This is the idea of everyday love that I have found to be more powerful than any of the destructive forces I have encountered in my life so far.