

NVC Quick Connect

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Growing the Seed of Love

By Stephanie Bachmann Mattei, PhD

As human beings we all deeply long for unconditional love. Yet, the vast majority of us have experienced different degrees of conditional love and acceptance.

Since experiences shape the structure and function of the brain, I regard the experience of conditional love as a form of deep wounding most of us carry to some extent.

That experience may be part of our conscious memory (the living room of our brain) or buried in our subconscious memory (the basement of our brain). Either way, it may manifest in the intensity, frequency and duration of our stress response when this system gets activated, which causes our brain state to shift into fight, flight or freeze.

Love as Presence

When my spouse behaves in ways that I appreciate, it is effortless for me to convey to him how much I cherish him. I naturally radiate love toward him. My living room is comfy and full of light, and its basement is out of sight.

Yet, what does my behavior convey to him when he happens to behave in ways I do not like? Am I transmitting full acceptance of where he is at in the moment? Or am I transmitting disapproval, through verbal and/or non-verbal communication (i.e. body language)?

Am I still in a place of self-awareness and choice as to prioritize connection? Or am I pulled into reactivity and conditionality? Maybe withdrawing emotionally from him, or withholding the relationship in reactive, subconscious ways?

After over 20 years of marriage, I have come to believe that "to love" means "to be fully present." So, one additional question I can ask myself is: What is the quality of presence that I offer to my beloved one at these times?

That is a very crucial question for me.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) has helped me understand and initiate a shift from conditional to unconditional love by differentiating between love as an *autonomous value* (the

uninfluenced, self-generated and self-governed life energy in me seeking embodiment regardless of the other person's behavior) and love as a *feeling*: a subjective, conscious, psycho-physiological experience influenced, among other things, by mental states and biological reactions.

If I indiscriminately buy into the cultural conditioning that love is a feeling, my behavior will reflect that. All emotions, pleasant neutral or unpleasant, change every so many seconds, depending on situations, what need is stirred in us, and what thoughts we focus on and cultivate.

Granted, in everyday language, love is often used as a static, unchanging feeling as in, "*I love you*" or "*Do you love me?*" Yet, when we look at love as a feeling, it invariably holds a connotation of constant mutation and fuels inconsistent behavior.

When we hold love as a feeling we may also tend to use it with the more or less conscious intention of manipulating the other person into doing what we want them to do, as in, "*If you really loved me you would... or you wouldn't...*"

Love as an Autonomous Value

In contrast, love as an autonomous value is a constant, universal human need, a seed stored in our human consciousness, a quality of life energy in all of us; though our awareness of it may fluctuate or even be dormant.

As humans, each of us has many different ways or strategies (informed by our cultural, societal and familial directives) by which we may envision fulfilling our need for love. Yet, our human heart longs for this quality of non-conditionality: to freely give love, and to graciously receive it.

Holding love as an autonomous value puts the responsibility of loving and "feeling loved" (i.e. meeting my need for love) on *me*. I empower myself to care for and look after this seed of love, water it, and help it grow into a healthy, hearty plant.

One fundamental way to do this is to listen to myself, to my own needs. By coming home to myself, extending love to my own being, this seed is given the necessary nutrients to grow into a flourishing plant.

Training myself to pause and ask "What do I need in this moment?" is a powerful way to counteract the tendency of the mind to run away from itself (forgetfulness). All too often, I have experienced that when I run away from myself, I also alienate myself from those around me.

So, I sincerely treasure recognizing my own existence, and bringing love to myself.

Holding love as an autonomous value that I am responsible to nourish and embody, also awakens me to what is truly important *to me* and how *I* genuinely want to show up in the world. It grounds me in my own principles and invites me to live in my own integrity, power, and self-determination, regardless of how my partner behaves.

As neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, PhD (www.RickHanson.net and www.WiseBrain.org) reminded me when participating in a retreat he led, "*Remaining virtuous in the face of provocation is a profound expression of non-harming and benevolence.*"

In fact, embracing love as a value empowers me to minimize the impact of inflammatory triggers, helps me to stay awake, and empowers me to see wholeness where there is pain.

By understanding love as a value and being grounded in it as a "unilateral virtue," (borrowing the term from Rick Hanson) I empower myself to uphold a quality of presence within the relationship that celebrates freely giving and receiving love. A quality of presence based on:

- Acceptance and Trust
- Empathic Attunement
- Understanding, Joy and Freedom
- Appreciation and Gratitude
- Integrity and Responsibility
- Vulnerability and Authenticity
- Truthfulness and Compassion

Love as Self-Compassion

Of course, in reality there are times in which I am not self-attuned and love does not get to be embodied in me as an unconditional value. I get trapped in the illusion of separation rather than maintaining an awareness of my life intertwining with the life of my beloved in a way that recognizes there is only a *we*, rather than a *you* and a *me*.

Those are the moments in which recommitting to unconditional love, starting with myself, gets me back on track. I can awaken to the fact that:

- I have not lived in line with my deepest authenticity ("This is a moment of suffering")
- I value making room for my humanness ("Suffering is part of life")
- I have the opportunity to re-commit to handing myself over to unconditional love ("May I be gentle with myself").

This three part mantra is one of the many tools of self-compassion that I have learned from Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer in their 8-week Mindful Self-Compassion Training.

Having re-established a loving relationship with myself, I can now turn towards my partner again in loving-kindness.

Love as Awareness of our Finitude

One of the most powerful strategies I am aware of for tapping into the power of interpersonal, unconditional love is being fully present for my loved one with a quality of awareness that touches the finitude of our experience.

Everything is finite. We are transient beings. Each moment is a "present". Impermanence is the only certainty we have.

Being wholeheartedly present, mindful of impermanence, and grateful for the moments we do have together is the greatest gift I can give to myself and to my loved one.

When I tap into the powerful energy of mindfulness, gratitude arises and nourishes love in my heart. I water my love-seed.

This summer, I had the blessing of meeting the Reverend Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hahn. Here are some of the mantras he suggests to use to support our ability to be mindfully present in our intimate relationship.

Darling, I am here for you.

Darling, I know you are there, and your presence deeply contributes to my happiness.

Darling, this is a happy moment.

Those words, mentally repeated, or verbally expressed with focused awareness, support me in savoring deeply the present moment and the miracle of being together.

So, next time your partner behaves in ways you really do not enjoy, how about pushing the pause button, take 3 deep breaths and then ask ourselves, "In this moment, am I holding Love as a fleeting feeling or as a need?" Three more breaths: "Unilateral virtue: how does that look in this unique and unrepeatable moment?"

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