

GLASGOW UNITARIAN CHURCH
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THEME: LIFE INTELLIGENCE PART TWO: ABOUT LOVE (AND FAITH AND HOPE)

Today I am continuing the theme of what I call Life Intelligence. I shall say more about love – not primarily romantic love but the emotional commitment to self, to others and to the natural world to which we belong. I shall add some thoughts about the relationship of love to faith and hope.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is probably the best known story told by Jesus. He overturned the assumption that love is only for “kith and kin”. It is a provocative story because the wounded man is not rescued by his kith and kin, the priest and the Levite, but by one of the Samaritans who were bitter enemies of the Jews. Love and compassion demand that we recognise our common humanity regardless of the differences that may separate us.

Chad Varah – who practised faith, love and hope

The Samaritans is a charity that was founded in 1953 by Chad Varah, an Anglican vicar, who was inspired to care for those who are despairing and suicidal. Volunteers, Christians and others, provide a round-the-clock service every day of the year for strangers seeking help. The caller may have suffered a terrible assault like the original victim on the road to Jericho. The caller may be someone who has committed a terrible crime such as murder. All alike are offered love in their hour of need. Each is heard with compassion. The Samaritans has become an international movement known as Befrienders Worldwide and provides a similar service of voluntary emotional support in more than 40 countries.

In 1935 Chad Varah, then 24 years old, conducted his first funeral as an assistant curate in a poor London parish. The funeral was for a girl aged 13 who had taken her own life because she believed she had caught a terrible disease and would die a slow, painful and shameful death. In fact, she had just started to menstruate. Varah vowed at her graveside to devote himself to helping others to overcome the sort of isolation and ignorance that had caused the girl to commit suicide. “Little girl,” he said, “you have changed my life.”

Without concern for his reputation as an Anglican priest, he pioneered sex education among children and young people and also advised married couples who were having problems. “It was marriage guidance before it was invented”, he said. He was fearless in breaking down the barriers of taboo, ignorance, and prejudice in a very conservative society. Later in life he became the patron of the Terence Higgins Trust for the sufferers of HIV and AIDS.

True to the model of the Good Samaritan, Varah practised love in action, even at the risk to his own safety and reputation.

That did not mean he did not care about his own needs. In order to devote himself to projects such as the Samaritans, he found a church with rich patrons and no congregation because it was a historic building requiring lengthy restoration. Chad Varah did not retire from the Anglican priesthood until he was 92 and died four days short of his 96th birthday. He enjoyed a long and happy marriage and he and his wife raised a daughter and four sons. Apart from a strong constitution, he must have adopted a healthy lifestyle.

Loving your neighbour and yourself

Remember that the command was to love your neighbour as yourself. Without a proper love for yourself, your love for others, such as it is, may not be healthy. Let me try to explain.

The idea of loving yourself may sound egotistical, conceited, narcissistic, but that would mean loving **only** yourself. If you love only yourself, then you cannot relate to others as real persons. They exist only to be used by you for your own selfish purposes or to be controlled by you because you trust no-one. If you love only yourself, you are incapable of receiving genuine love and you may despise those who try to love you. In fact, that kind of self-love is a defence against rejection or abandonment or abuse. That is the tragedy of the person who is very narcissistic.

There are those who find it difficult to love themselves but who feel a bit better when they are caring for others. When you always put the needs of others first, you may exaggerate your responsibility for others to the point of being used, exploited or taken for granted at the cost of your own wellbeing. You may invite an unhealthy dependency in those who expect to be rescued from their own responsibilities. When you do not love and respect yourself, you may not believe that you are loved and accepted for your own sake rather than for pleasing others. More than that, you may neglect your own needs, including your health.

When you truly love, respect and forgive yourself as a person who is not perfect but good enough, then you can relate to others in a respectful and loving way. You have the humility to admit your mistakes and to learn from them. You look for the best in the other person, and you offer genuine appreciation. But you will not accept behaviour that constitutes a significant problem for you and others. Honesty and consistency in relationships are very important, being true to yourself and to others. Forgiveness is another vital capacity. Those who are too quick to criticise others are often those who are most critical and unforgiving of themselves. To be healthy, we need both to give love and to receive love.

Loving and valuing your life means caring about every aspect – physical, social, economic, emotional and spiritual – including your body because you are your body and your body is you!

Having faith in human nature

The more that psychologists learn about human development from the time of birth and about the physiology of the human brain, the more we understand about human nature and the origin of our emotional and psychological problems. The dismal view of human nature that was shared by John Calvin and Sigmund Freud is not supported by this growing body of knowledge.

I am a humanist in the sense that I have faith in human nature. In response to the influence of our early experience, the prevailing culture and our innate disposition, we may adopt an attitude to life that is primarily optimistic or pessimistic. We choose whether to focus on the fear of death, threats and dangers, our personal limitations, and the risk of loss or to focus on the love of life, the possibilities for progress and change, our personal potential, and the appreciation of abundance.

If we learn to trust our experience and awareness, we can make good decisions about who and what to depend on. That is the basis of rational faith, even in the presence of uncertainty. Having faith in another person is based on your actual experience of that person – values, attitudes, and congruence (their actions are consistent with their words).

Having faith in human nature means looking for the best in others – sometimes despite their past behaviour or reputation. It means believing in the possibility of transformation even in the most unlikely situations.

I have worked in several prisons including Barlinnie, Low Moss and Greenock. At Greenock Prison there is a block where every prisoner is serving a life sentence. I ran a course in relationships for a group where they had spent an average of 16 years inside – in one case it had been 24 years. No matter what terrible crime these men had committed, there had to be the possibility of redemption and rehabilitation. Without experiencing love and compassion, these men were unlikely to change.

One of my heroes is Ken Murray who was a principal nursing officer at Barlinnie in the 1970s. He was very active in the Prison Officers Association and he campaigned for them to have a more active role in rehabilitation. He helped to establish the original Special Unit at Barlinnie for Scotland's most difficult and dangerous inmates including Jimmy Boyle. The play, "The Hardman", based on his story has been recently revived. Boyle had spent a long period of solitary confinement in the notorious cages at Porterfield in Inverness.

In his book, "A Sense of Freedom", Boyle described his arrival at the Special Unit. He had absolutely no trust in any human being, least of all the hated 'screws'. He wrote, "There were inner barriers that I had built up to help me survive." "The screws were very friendly towards me, calling me Jimmy, but I wasn't taken in by that."

"Then I was *asked* by one of them if I would come round and sort out my personal property with him. I went, and while we opened the parcels containing old clothing he did something that to him was so natural but to me was something that had never been done before. He turned to me and handed me a pair of scissors and asked me to cut open some of them. He then went about his business. I was absolutely stunned. That was the first thing that made me begin to feel human again. It was the completely natural way it was done. This simple gesture made me think." The officer who handed Jimmy Boyle the scissors was Ken Murray.

Such trusting actions communicated acceptance and love to someone who had behaved like a wild animal in the prison jungle. The effect was transformational.

It is now possible to demonstrate through brain scans that the physiology of the brain is changed by consistently loving relationships. For good or ill we are changed by those around us. The company we keep is very important for our wellbeing.

There is hope in the power of love. To quote Erich Fromm in "The Art of Loving":
"To love means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person. Love is an act of faith."

Love is more than a feeling, a sentiment; love is a state of mind, an attitude, a decision, a commitment, a way of living.

I agree with Fromm that "love is the only rational answer to the problem of human existence. To speak of love is not 'preaching', for the simple reason that it means to speak of the ultimate and real need in every human being."

How will we let love inform what we are as a community and what our purpose is?